SPEARHEAD

21st PANZER DIVISION
Rommel's Afrika Korps Spearhead

CHRIS ELLIS

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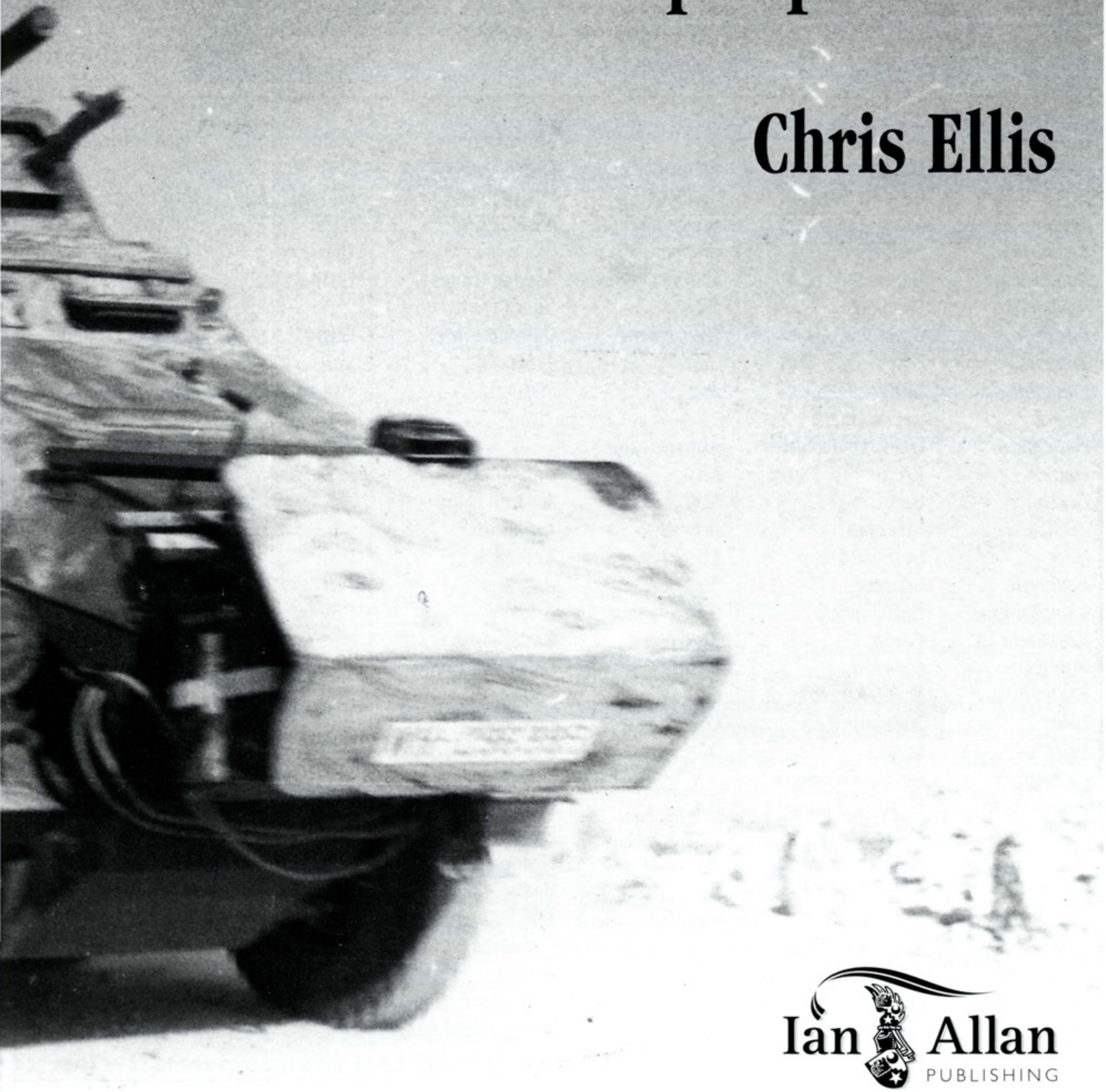

Ian Allan
PUBLISHING

Previous page: Sd Kfz 231 armoured car of 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion on patrol early in the 1941 advance into Cyrenaica.

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Glossary

Abteilung	Battalion/ Detachment
Armee	Army
Artillerie	Artillery
Aufklärung	Recce
Ausbildung	Training
Bataillon	Battalion
Begleit	Escort
Einheiten	Units
Ersatz	Replacement
Feldersatz	Field replacement
Flak	AA gun
Geschütz	Gun
Grenadier	Rifleman
Heer	German Army
Infanterie	Infantry
Kampfgruppe	Battle group
Kavallerie	Cavalry
Kompanie	Company
Kraftfahrpark	Maintenance depot
Lehr	Training
Leichte	Light
Luftwaffe	German Air Force
Motorisiert	Motorised
Nachrichten	Signals
Nebelwerfer	Grenade launcher (multi-barrel)
Panzergrenadier	Armd infantry
Panzerjäger	Anti-tank infantry
Pionier	Engineer
Sanität	Medical
Schütze	Rifleman
Schwer	Heavy
Stab	Staff (HQ)
Stamm	Cadre
Stellung	Position/static
Sturmgeschütz	Assault Gun
Truppe	Troop
Versorgungstruppen	Service troops
Wache	Guard
Wehrmacht	German armed forces
Zug	Platoon

Abbreviations

AA	Anti-aircraft
ADC	Aide de camp
Arty	Artillery
Atk	Anti-tank
Bn	Battalion
Brig	Brigade
Bty	Battery
C-in-C	Commander-in-Chief
Col	Column
Coy	Company
DAK	Deutsches Afrika Korps
Det	Detachment
Engr	Engineer
MC	Motorcycle
Hy	Heavy
KDG	King's Dragoon Guards
le FH	*leichte Feldhaubitze* (light field gun)
Lt	Lieutenant; light
Maint	Maintenance
Mor	Mortar
Mot Inf	Motorised infantry
Mtrel	Materiel
QM	Quartermaster
OKW	*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht*
OKH	*Oberkommando des Heeres*
Pak	*Panzerabwehrkanone* (anti-tank gun)
Pl	Platoon
PzBefWag	*Panzerbefehlswagen* (armd comd vehicle)
PzGr	*Panzergrenadier*
PzJr	*Panzerjäger*
PzKpfw	*Panzerkampfwagen* tank
Recce	Reconnaissance
RA	Royal Artillery
RHQ	Regimental HQ
RTR	Royal Tank Regt
Sect	Section
Sig	Signals
SP	Self-propelled
Tac	Tactical
Tk	Tank
Veh	Vehicle
WH	*Wehrmacht Heer*

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Author's Note

Any book covering the history of a military formation has its limitation. It has to veer between rather plain lists of dates and achievements, and stories of courage and excitement in battle. 21st Panzer Division was interesting primarily for its part in the North African campaign. However, the famous number was used again for one of the divisions defending the Atlantic Wall and, as it happens, the 'new' 21st Panzer Division gave further distinguished but limited service in the Normandy campaign of summer 1944. It would then go on to fight on the Eastern Front against the Russians in the last days of the war.

The war in North Africa divides neatly into two—the sparring by relatively small forces in 1941, and the bludgeoning by two much-reinforced heavyweights in 1942 and early 1943. It was easy to isolate 21st Panzer Division actions in 1941 for many engagements were at hardly more than divisional level—and, therefore, this period is of much interest to wargamers and 'armchair tacticians'. In the 1942–43 campaigns it is much less easy to isolate the activities of a single division. So in this book I have covered the exciting small-time operations of 1941 in some detail, and used a broader brush for 1942 onwards. It would take a much bigger book than this to cover all the 1942 actions in minute detail.

Acknowledgements

My thanks go to Peter Chamberlain, Brian L. Davies, George Forty and Simon Forty for some of the information and many of the illustrations used in this book. The maps on page 64 are taken from Robert Kershaw's excellent *D-Day* (Ian Allan Publishing, 1985).

ORIGINS & HISTORY

Not all famous fighting formations have a long tradition of battles and campaigns stretching over many years and more than one war. Some become famous for their exploits in only one hard-fought campaign—of these, 21st Panzer Division is an excellent example. Before the year 1941 it did not exist; yet two years later it had become one of the best-known fighting divisions of the war. The spearhead of Rommel's Deutsches Afrika Korps (DAK), there was no part of the war in the Western Desert in which it did not have some involvement. In most of the notable events of the North African campaign, 21st Panzer Division was in the thick of the fighting, the key to success—or failure—in the fortunes of the DAK.

None of the activities or actions in which 21st Panzer Division became involved had been anticipated even a year before it came into existence. Prior to the outbreak of World War 2, the German High Command (differentiated in this book as OKW=command of all German forces; OKH=command of the German Army) had made no provision for operations outside Europe or Russia—in spite of the highly developed and disciplined staff tradition of the German Army which might have been expected to plan for all contingencies. There appeared to be no official appreciation by either the OKH or staff that the British and their Commonwealth forces had vast experience of colonial operations in hot and arid climates, not least in World War 1, when the British had been so active in Egypt from which they launched the campaigns in Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia. Between the wars, too, British mandates in Palestine and Egypt, and peacekeeping in the Gulf states gave valuable expertise in Middle East operations. During the Abyssinian campaign by Italy in 1936, the British had even established a modest but balanced Mobile Force (based at Mersa Matruh) which provided early experience of desert operations with modern vehicles and weapons. Hence, when war was declared against Germany in September 1939, the British not only had a useful tradition of desert fighting knowledge, but there was a British military force already in place in Egypt.

During the momentous year of 1940, German military ambitions were fully occupied in Hitler's bold European campaigns. The invasion of Denmark and Norway in April 1940, the latter involving weak and fragmented opposition by a Franco-British expeditionary force, was quickly followed by the swift and well-planned invasion of France and Flanders, starting on 10 May, which conquered Luxembourg, Holland and Belgium in short order and swept the British Expeditionary Force out of Northern France via Dunkirk all within three weeks. The French, demoralised and outfought, sued for peace on 17 June, and on 21 June were forced into a humiliating armistice. This did, however, leave more than a third of the southern part of the country unoccupied, run by a puppet government based at Vichy under the veteran World War 1 hero Marshal Pétain.

Above: PzKpfw 38(t) tanks of 7th Panzer Division waiting to move forward during the advance in France, May 1940. Rommel, later the Afrika Korps commander, obtained his first major experience of handling tank forces at this time as commander of 7th Panzer Division.

During the German campaign in France and Flanders, one of the German divisional commanders, whose fast-moving 7th Panzer Division gave distinguished and effective service, was Generalmajor Erwin Rommel, and his skill as an armoured force commander impressed Hitler. By now Hitler was master of most of Europe with only Great Britain standing in his way. So the summer and early autumn of 1940 was taken up largely with the attempt of the Luftwaffe to gain air superiority over British skies—in what became known as the Battle of Britain—while the German army and navy made preparations for a projected, but much delayed seaborne assault on southeast England, Operation 'Sealion' (*Seelöwe*).

Against all this activity in Europe, the Mediterranean and Middle East were of much less significance to the German High Command in the spring and early summer of 1940. Hitler's Italian ally, Benito Mussolini, already had colonial interests in Africa including the major colony of Cyrenaica (Libya) to the west of Egypt. At the time of his conquest of Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in 1936, Mussolini had actually been a more feared dictator than Adolf Hitler. However, for most of the time after that Mussolini postured and boasted but did little that was effective. In April 1939 he annexed neighbouring Albania in a 24-hour campaign, soon after Hitler had taken over the whole of Czechoslovakia and annexed Memel from Lithuania.

Even after Britain and France declared war on Germany in September 1939, Mussolini held back until he saw the way fortunes were going. On 10 June 1940, however, with France about to fall, he declared war on Britain and France, and just before the French armistice he sent a military invasion force into Southern France, via the Alpine front and centring on Mentone as an objective.

North Africa first entered German High Command thoughts on 24 July 1940, a few days after the decision to invade Great Britain was taken. The staff considered possible options in case Operation 'Sealion' was postponed or abandoned, and one idea was to back up the Italian Army in Libya with German armoured forces in case it undertook operations against the British in Egypt. The German Army C-in-C, Generalfeldmarschall Walter von Brauchitsch, put this up to Hitler who liked the idea. 3rd Panzer Division, therefore, fresh from its triumphs in the French campaign, was told to prepare for service in North Africa. Meanwhile the Chief of Mobile Forces, General Wilhelm Ritter von Thoma, was sent to Libya to sound out the Italian C-in-C, Marshal Graziani, on this prospect of German assistance. He got a lukewarm reception, however, and Graziani showed no enthusiasm at all, confident of the strength of his own forces.

This was emphasised further when Hitler and Mussolini had their famous 'summit' meeting at the Brenner Pass on 4 October. Hitler brought up again the prospect of German assistance in North Africa, and Mussolini flippantly replied that he would need no assistance until his North African army had pushed the British back to Mersa Matruh, at which time some German tanks and Stuka dive-bombers might come in useful.

Von Thoma's own assessment of the situation was produced about that time. He concluded that any operations in North Africa would best be carried out by German troops alone and thought four panzer divisions would be necessary, not withstanding the difficulty of transporting them and supplying them across the Mediterranean and having to run the gauntlet of the British Royal Navy to do so. This proposal was politically and logistically impossible at the time (not least because four panzer divisions could not be spared). When Mussolini carried out his sudden invasion of Greece on 28 October 1940 without consulting or forewarning Germany, Hitler was sufficiently disillusioned to order the postponement of any German plans for involvement in North Africa. As a result 3rd Panzer Division was diverted to another project, Operation 'Felix', the plan—never realised, of course—to attack Gibraltar.

Less than two months later, however, all this had changed. The war in the Western Desert had actually started in a modest way in June 1940, soon after Italy had declared war on Great Britain. At that time Egypt was being guarded by quite

Below: The success of Rommel and his fellow armoured division generals in sweeping away the British and French forces in his path led to the debacle of Dunkirk and a severe weakening of British fighting strength and equipment in 1940. Here British troops come back from France in May 1940.

a small British force, but British troops took part in active reconnaissance patrols along the Libya-Egypt border. In mid-September 1940 the Tenth Italian Army moved ponderously 60 miles into Egypt under the command of Marshal Graziani. British strength in Egypt had expanded meanwhile from the original 7th Armoured Division by the addition of three Commonwealth divisions, forming what was called the Western Desert Force under command of Lt-Gen R. N. O'Connor. On 9 December 1940, O'Connor started a well-planned and brilliantly conducted offensive against the numerically superior Italian Army and this resulted in a sweeping conquest of Cyrenaica, including the taking of of the important towns of Bardia, Tobruk and Benghazi. The Italian Army was virtually eliminated by the first week in February with the capture of 130,000 men and a big haul of equipment.

Above: Rommel, in characteristic pose, directs troop movements from his staff car early in the Cyrenaica campaign. A staff officer with map case stands alongside. This photo dates from soon after the capture of Mechili.

While this campaign was at its height, Hitler became alarmed at the political consequences of this defeat and realised that German reinforcements would be needed. Not least of his worries was that the British conquest of the whole of North Africa, plus command of the seas in the Mediterranean, would be a strategic disaster for Germany. Therefore, on 11 January 1941 Hitler signed his Military Directive No 22 ordering the Army Command to raise a 'special blocking force' (*Sperrverband*) for dispatch to Tripoli, while the Luftwaffe Command was ordered to transfer Fliegerkorps X to Sicily for operations against British shipping and bases in the Mediterranean. Hitler met Mussolini on 19 January to discuss this. Mussolini accepted the idea of the blocking force, but on 22 January the important base of Tobruk fell to the British who now looked set fair to take the whole of Cyrenaica. It now seemed likely that a modest blocking force would be insufficient on its own and a force with offensive capability would be needed instead. Hitler may have been influenced in this by a comment made by the Army Chief of General Staff, General Franz Halder, in October 1940 that a single German division could probably push the British back to the Nile if Germany did have to get involved in North Africa.(As it happened this prediction had a bigger element of truth in it than anyone thought at the time.)

The Army General Staff acted quickly. The move to Tripoli was designated Operation 'Sunflower' (*Sonnenblume*) in orders issued on 10 February 1941, and the commander of German military forces in North Africa was to be Generalleutnant Erwin Rommel who had been picked and appointed personally by Hitler on 6 February. From his exploits as a panzer division commander in both the Polish and French campaigns, Hitler considered Rommel to be the best man for a post which would demand considerable on the spot decision-making a long way from home.

Despite the powerful size and strength of the German Army early in 1941, the forces allocated the Rommel's command were relatively scanty and weak. The main reason for this was that North Africa was still considered something of a sideshow despite the massive defeat of the Italian forces and, more importantly, the invasion of Russia scheduled for early summer 1941 was already in its advanced planning stages and took priority of allocation over all other considerations.

Nonetheless, advance members of staff for the special blocking force were appointed by 31 January and sent to Naples to await early passage to Tripoli. On 12 February, Rommel and his chief adjutant Rudolf Schmundt, plus other key staff members, reached Tripoli to set up their HQ. On 19 February the German expeditionary force to North Africa was given the name that was to become famous, Deutsches Afrika Korps, and the order stipulated that all German forces were to remain at all times under control of their commander and not to be put under Italian command except for periods of tactical co-operation when necessary.

READY FOR WAR

Right: PzKpfw III tanks of 5th Panzer Regiment move along the coast road towards the Cyrenaica frontier in March 1941.

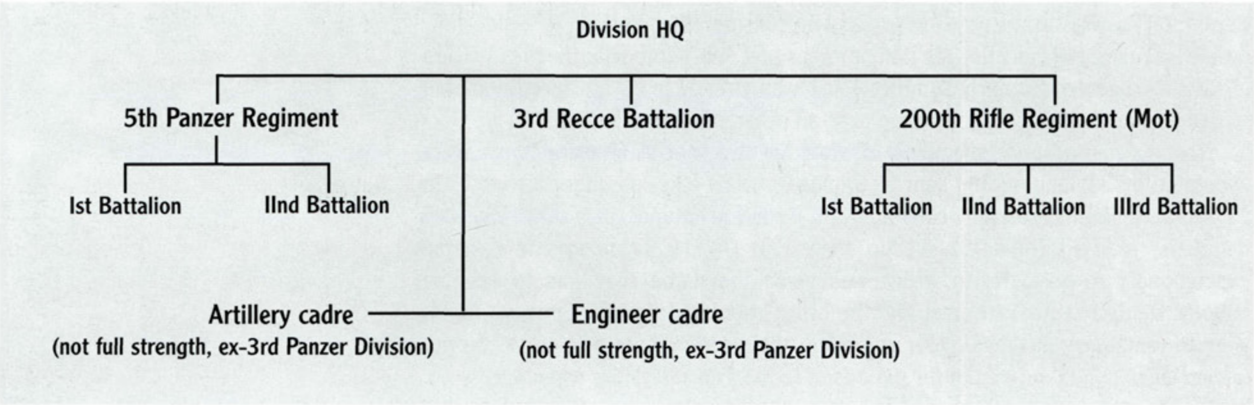
Below right: 5th Panzer Regiment's PzKpfw IIIs parade in front of an admiring crowd on arrival in Africa.

5th LIGHT DIVISION

The division that was later to become 21st Panzer Division had a very modest birth indeed. As originally conceived the special blocking force was seen as having an anti-tank and defence function. It was to be made up mainly from elements drawn from 3rd Panzer Division, which had been the formation originally earmarked for North Africa back in the summer of 1940. There was no intention at this stage of sending a full-strength panzer division.

The first unit designated to to move was 39th Panzerjäger (anti-tank) Battalion from 3rd Panzer Division. This was a motorised unit with halftracks and trucks towing anti-tank guns, three companies each with nine Pak 36 37mm guns and two Pak 50mm guns. However, events already dictated that an armour, reconnaissance and infantry presence would be needed. 5th Panzer Regiment of 3rd Panzer Division was chosen as the armour element, having at the time an under-strength establishment of 20 PzKpfw IVs, 75 PzKpfw IIIs, 45 PzKpfw IIs and 25 Pzkpfw I Ausf B tanks (including command and observation vehicles).

Also from 3rd Panzer Division came 3rd Reconnaissance (*Aufklärung*) Battalion with a light and heavy armoured car company, a motorcycle company and heavy weapons support platoons. Even this was under strength, for one of the light armoured car platoons had VW Kübelwagens substituted. The infantry element was 200th Rifle (Schützen) Regiment from 3rd Panzer Division, and artillery support came from one battalion only of 75th Artillery Regiment, also from 3rd Panzer. Divisional staff was drawn from the staff of 3rd Panzer Brigade within 3rd Panzer Division, the chief staff officer (1a)* being Major Hauser and the intelligence officer (1c) being Hauptmann von Kluge.


Division HQ
5th Panzer Regiment
Ist Battalion
IInd Battalion
3rd Recce Battalion
200th Rifle Regiment (Mot)
Ist Battalion
IInd Battalion
IIIrd Battalion
Artillery cadre
(not full strength, ex-3rd Panzer Division)
Engineer cadre
(not full strength, ex-3rd Panzer Division)

*German staff officer numbers—similar to our GSO (General Staff Officer) 1 etc—

To these ex-3rd Panzer Division units were added army troops from various depots and formations comprising 606th Flak Battalion (with 20mm guns), 605th Panzerjäger Battalion with three companies each of nine 4.7cm *Pak(t)(Sf) auf PzKpfw I Ausf B*—an ex-Czech 47mm anti-tank gun on a PzKpfw I Ausf B chassis (see photo page 16)—plus the 2nd and 8th Machine Gun Battalions.

This scratch formation was officially named 5th Light Division (Motorised) on 18 February 1941 and its divisional commander, effective from that date, was Generalmajor Johannes Streich, who had been awarded the Knight's Cross for distinguished service while commanding 15th Panzer Regiment within 5th Panzer Division (as an *Oberst*—colonel) during the 1940 French campaign. By this date the first elements of the division were already in Tripoli, arriving in the February period, though the last of the tanks did not finally arrive until 11 March, by which time the division had already seen action.

UNIT STRENGTHS

Light divisions were established by the Wehrmacht in 1938 and were essentially reduced-scale tank divisions. The full establishment was one tank (Panzer) battalion, with four motor rifle battalions (originally called *Kavallerie Schützen* to reflect the 'light' nature of the division) and recce, engineer and artillery battalions. However, 5th Light Division when formed departed from this establishment by having a tank regiment of two battalions, only three motor rifle battalions, and other units initially in only cadre strength. The bulk of the units allocated to 5th Light Division were taken from 3rd Panzer Division which had taken part in the campaign in France and Flanders in 1940. The tank regiment was 5th Panzer Regiment and the reconnaissance battalion that played an important part in early operations was 3rd Recce Battalion.

The ad hoc nature of 5th Light Division was such that it never had a full establishment of tanks as laid down on paper. The two panzer battalions in theory would have had between them 105 PzKpfw III and IV medium tanks and 51 PzKpfw I and II light tanks. In the 5th Panzer Regiment there were only 130 tanks of all types of which two-thirds were gun tanks, the rest being unarmed observation or command tanks.

Below: A 10.5cm *leichte Feldhaubitze* (le FH) 18 of Ist Battalion 75th Artillery Regiment ready to fire in one of the early engagements of the Cyrenaica campaign, possibly at Agedabia.

By September 1941 the 5th Light Division had been brought up to Panzer division strength insofar as supplies would allow and was then redesignated 21st Panzer Division. While there were theoretical establishments laid down for the size, equipment and manning of all German units, including armoured divisions, the exigencies of war meant that there were many understrength units or ad hoc units made up from whatever equipment and men were available. This was true of the war in the Western Desert as it was later in Northwest Europe. The following tables, however, taken from US Intelligence Reports give the theoretical full strength allocations, though they were rarely achieved.

1. Composition, armament and manpower of a tank regiment in the early part of World War II.

Units	Men	MCs	Other Vehs	PzII	PzIII	PzIV	MG	20mm	50mm	75mm
Two Bns of three Coys	1,700	120	255	21	77	28	263	21	71	28
Two Bns of four Coys	2,011	134	284	21	111	28	331	21	105	28
Three Bns of three Coys	2,416	170	353	28	114	30	400	28	106	30

2. Composition, armament and manpower of a tank regiment in the later part of the war (1943-44)

Units	Men	MCs	Other Vehs	PzII	PzIII	PzIV	MG	20mm	50mm	75mm
RHQ (inc Sig Pl, Lt Tk Pl and repair platoon)	128	10	15	7	3	0	13	7	1	0
Three Bn HQs	63	9	15	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Three Bn HQ Coys	666	78	135	21	9	0	87	21	3	0
Three Battalions	1,251	63	108	0	102	30	288	0	102	30
Supply column	56	4	18	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Workshop Coy	252	6	62	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	2,416	170	353	28	114	30	388	28	106	30

3. Composition of a tank battalion in a Panzer Division

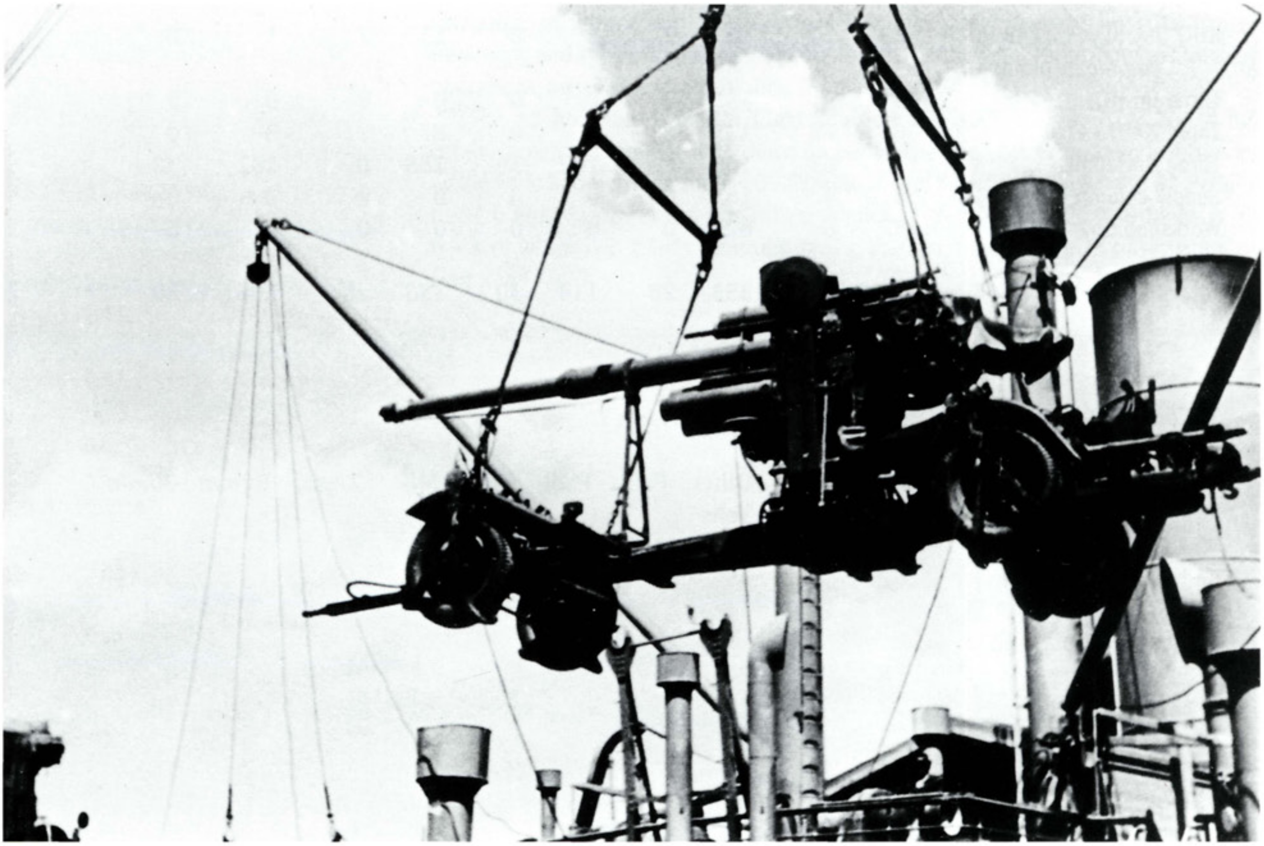
Units	Men	MCs	Other Vehs	PzII	PzIII	PzIV	MG	20mm	50mm	75mm
Bn HQs	21	3	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bn HQ Coy (inc Sig Pl, Lt Tk Pl, MC Pl, AA Pl and repair platoon)	222	26	45	7	3	0	40	7	1	0
Two light Coys	288	14	24	0	34	0	68	0	34	0
One medium Coy	129	7	12	0	0	14	28	0	0	14
Total	660	50	86	7	37	14	136	7	35	14

4. Composition of a tank battalion in a light division (theoretical)

Units	Men	MCs	Other Vehs	PzII	PzIII	PzIV	MG	20mm	50mm	75mm
Battalion HQ	232	29	50	7	3	0	99	7	3	0
Two light Coys	288	14	24	0	34	0	0	0	34	0
One medium Coy	129	7	12	0	0	10	0	0	0	10
Total	649	50	86	7	37	10	99	7	37	10

5. Composition, armament, and manpower of an anti-tank battalion in a Panzer division.

Units	Men	MCs	Other	MG	20mm ATk	50mm ATk
Battalion HQ	76	5	23	0	0	0
Two Coys (each 9 x 50mm ATk guns)	276	22	52	6	0	18
One Coy (20mm AA/ATk guns on SP mounts)	200	17	18	4	12	0
Total	552	44	93	10	12	18



Left: In their brand-new tropical uniforms, men of 5th Light Division line up on parade in Tripoli on the day they arrived in North Africa, ready for inspection by Rommel.

Opposite page: Equipment for 5th Light Division is put ashore from transports in Tripoli. This is an 88mm Flak 18 of Ist Battalion 33rd Flak Regiment.

6. Organisation, equipment, and manpower of a full-strength Panzer Division, 1943.

Units	Men	Mtrel	Other	Lt AC	Hy AC	PzII	PzIII	PzIV
Division HQ	185	39	31	0	0	0	0	0
Panzer Regiment	2,416	170	353	0	0	28	114	30
Motorcycle Battalion	1,153	236	150	18	6	0	0	0
Motorised Infantry Brigade	4,409	314	713	0	0	0	0	0
Panzer Artillery Regiment	2,102	132	455	0	0	0	0	0
Panzer Engineer Battalion	979	101	220	0	0	2	0	0
Panzerjäger Battalion	552	44	93	0	0	0	0	0
Panzer Signal Battalion	420	27	85	0	0	0	0	0
Services	2,157	120	446	0	0	0	0	0
TOTAL	14,373	1,183	2,546	18	6	30	114	30

Weapons	Panzer Regt	MC Bn	Mot Inf Brig	Panzer Arty Regt	Panzer Engr Bn	ATk Bn	Panzer Sig Bn	TOTAL
Machine pistols	0	0	156	0	0	0	0	156
Machine guns, light	376	87	358	24	48	16	22	931
Machine guns, heavy	24	12	48	0	0	0	0	84
ATk rifles	0	9	36	0	0	0	0	45
20mm AA/ATk guns	28	18	0	0	2	12	0	60
37mm ATk guns	0	0	18	0	0	0	0	18
50mm tank guns	106	0	0	0	0	0	0	106
50mm ATk guns	0	3	18	0	0	18	0	39
81mm mortars	0	6	24	0	0	0	0	30
75mm inf howitzers	30	2	16	0	0	0	0	48
150mm inf howitzers	0	0	8	0	0	0	0	8
105mm gun-howitzers	0	0	0	24	0	0	0	24
105mm guns	0	0	0	4	0	0	0	4
150mm gun-howitzers	0	0	0	8	0	0	0	8

IN ACTION

Right: The complete order of battle for 5th Light Division when all elements had arrived in North Africa.

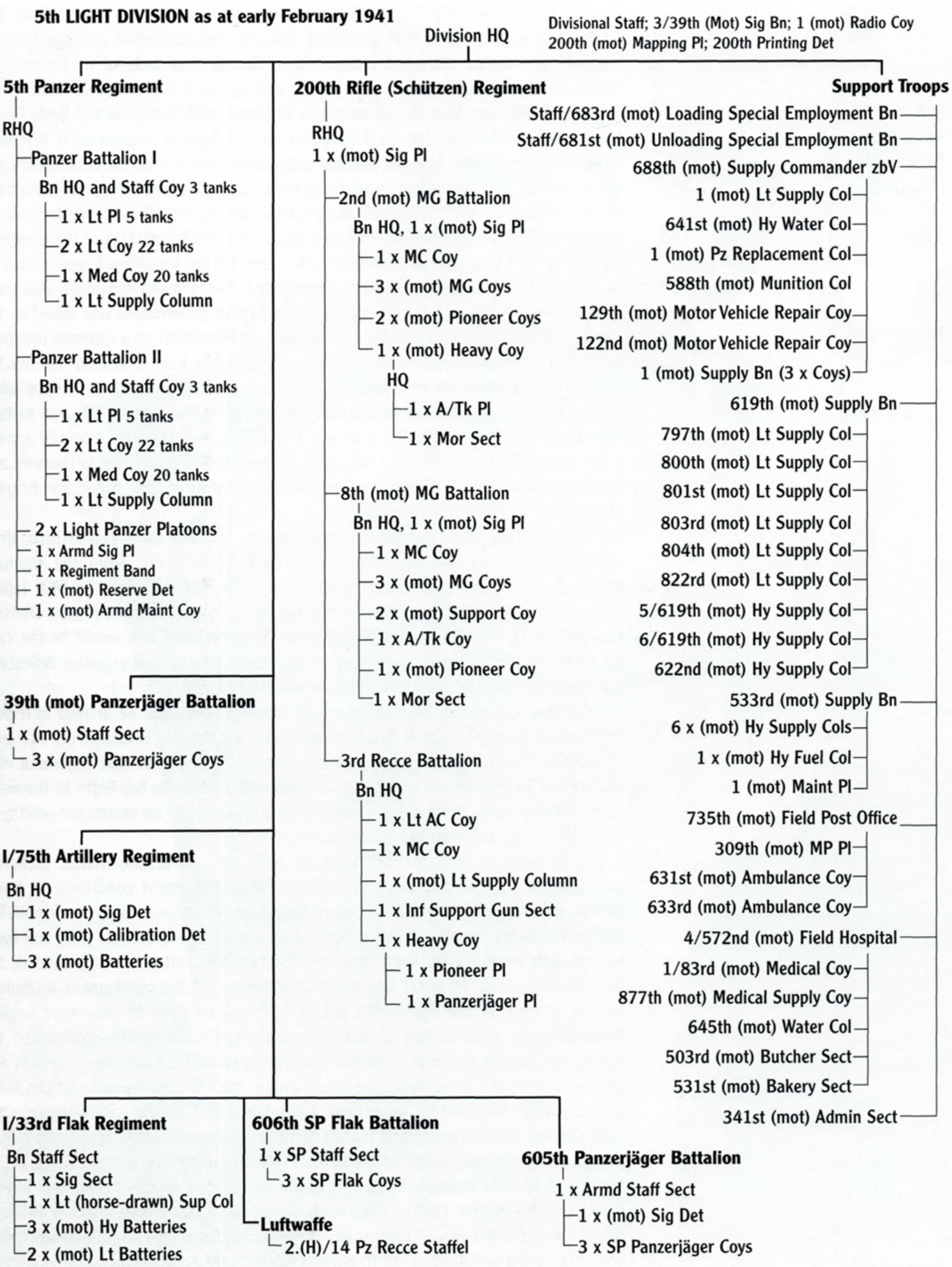
The 'light division' as a concept came about in the newly expanded army of Nazi Germany in an attempt to accommodate the old cavalry tradition in the age of tanks and mechanisation. Many senior officers at staff or command level had been cavalry officers in World War 1, and the German order of battle in World War 2 still included some cavalry regiments and even cavalry divisions with horses. Four light divisions were formed in 1938–39 and the basis for each consisted of one or two mechanised cavalry regiments (known as *Kavallerie Schützen*) which were fully motorised with rifle and heavy support companies, and included motorcycle platoons. There was also a motorcycle battalion or a motorcycle recce regiment, plus a motorised artillery regiment. The armoured element comprised a panzer battalion, though for the invasion of Poland in September 1939 a complete panzer regiment was added to 1st Light Division.

Experience in the Polish campaign suggested that panzer divisions were far more effective, so in October 1939 the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Light Divisions were expanded and reorganised to become the 6th, 7th and 8th Panzer Divisions respectively. In January 1940, 4th Light was similarly converted to become 9th Panzer Division. When the 'blocking force' for North Africa was being swiftly organised in January/February 1941, it was certainly not at panzer division strength, so the methodical bureaucracy at OKH (Army High Command) gave it the next available light division number—making it the 5th Light, even though its establishment did not match that of the original light divisions.

In several ways the fortunes of war were kind to Rommel's newly formed Deutsches Afrika Korps (DAK). It could have been wiped out straight away but it wasn't. For the first two months in North Africa 5th Light Division was, effectively, the entire Afrika Korps, because the next division allocated to the force—15th Panzer—was still being organised. It had not long before converted from an infantry division and was not up to strength until late March 1941, being scheduled to move to Tripoli in April. The third formation that eventually made up the predominantly German component of the Afrika Korps was another 'scratch' assembly of available artillery and infantry units formed by Rommel in August 1941 as Afrika Division zbV (zbV=*zur besonderen Verwendung*=for special purposes), renamed 90th Light Division on 27 November. It had no armoured element at all.

When 5th Light Division troops and equipment started to arrive in only small numbers in the 14–20 February period, they were, on paper and in practice, extremely vulnerable. After the British Western Desert Force had captured Tobruk on 21 January, General O'Connor was poised to sweep the Italians out of the rest of Cyrenaica and move on into Tripolitania (the northwestern province of Libya), taking

5th LIGHT DIVISION as at early February 1941



- **Division HQ** – Divisional Staff; 3/39th (Mot) Sig Bn; 1 (mot) Radio Coy; 200th (mot) Mapping Pl; 200th Printing Det
- **5th Panzer Regiment**
  - RHQ
    - Panzer Battalion I
      - Bn HQ and Staff Coy 3 tanks
        - 1 x Lt Pl 5 tanks
        - 2 x Lt Coy 22 tanks
        - 1 x Med Coy 20 tanks
        - 1 x Lt Supply Column
    - Panzer Battalion II
      - Bn HQ and Staff Coy 3 tanks
        - 1 x Lt Pl 5 tanks
        - 2 x Lt Coy 22 tanks
        - 1 x Med Coy 20 tanks
        - 1 x Lt Supply Column
    - 2 x Light Panzer Platoons
    - 1 x Armd Sig Pl
    - 1 x Regiment Band
    - 1 x (mot) Reserve Det
    - 1 x (mot) Armd Maint Coy
- **39th (mot) Panzerjäger Battalion**
  - 1 x (mot) Staff Sect
    - 3 x (mot) Panzerjäger Coys
- **I/75th Artillery Regiment**
  - Bn HQ
    - 1 x (mot) Sig Det
    - 1 x (mot) Calibration Det
    - 3 x (mot) Batteries
- **200th Rifle (Schützen) Regiment**
  - RHQ
  - 1 x (mot) Sig Pl
    - 2nd (mot) MG Battalion
      - Bn HQ, 1 x (mot) Sig Pl
        - 1 x MC Coy
        - 3 x (mot) MG Coys
        - 2 x (mot) Pioneer Coys
        - 1 x (mot) Heavy Coy
          - HQ
            - 1 x A/Tk Pl
            - 1 x Mor Sect
    - 8th (mot) MG Battalion
      - Bn HQ, 1 x (mot) Sig Pl
        - 1 x MC Coy
        - 3 x (mot) MG Coys
        - 2 x (mot) Support Coy
        - 1 x A/Tk Coy
        - 1 x (mot) Pioneer Coy
        - 1 x Mor Sect
    - 3rd Recce Battalion
      - Bn HQ
        - 1 x Lt AC Coy
        - 1 x MC Coy
        - 1 x (mot) Lt Supply Column
        - 1 x Inf Support Gun Sect
        - 1 x Heavy Coy
          - 1 x Pioneer Pl
          - 1 x Panzerjäger Pl
- **Support Troops**
  - Staff/683rd (mot) Loading Special Employment Bn
  - Staff/681st (mot) Unloading Special Employment Bn
  - 688th (mot) Supply Commander zbV
    - 1 (mot) Lt Supply Col
    - 641st (mot) Hy Water Col
    - 1 (mot) Pz Replacement Col
    - 588th (mot) Munition Col
    - 129th (mot) Motor Vehicle Repair Coy
    - 122nd (mot) Motor Vehicle Repair Coy
    - 1 (mot) Supply Bn (3 x Coys)
  - 619th (mot) Supply Bn
    - 797th (mot) Lt Supply Col
    - 800th (mot) Lt Supply Col
    - 801st (mot) Lt Supply Col
    - 803rd (mot) Lt Supply Col
    - 804th (mot) Lt Supply Col
    - 822rd (mot) Lt Supply Col
    - 5/619th (mot) Hy Supply Col
    - 6/619th (mot) Hy Supply Col
    - 622nd (mot) Hy Supply Col
  - 533rd (mot) Supply Bn
    - 6 x (mot) Hy Supply Cols
    - 1 x (mot) Hy Fuel Col
    - 1 (mot) Maint Pl
  - 735th (mot) Field Post Office
    - 309th (mot) MP Pl
    - 631st (mot) Ambulance Coy
    - 633rd (mot) Ambulance Coy
  - 4/572nd (mot) Field Hospital
    - 1/83rd (mot) Medical Coy
    - 877th (mot) Medical Supply Coy
    - 645th (mot) Water Col
    - 503rd (mot) Butcher Sect
    - 531st (mot) Bakery Sect
  - 341st (mot) Admin Sect
- **I/33rd Flak Regiment**
  - Bn Staff Sect
    - 1 x Sig Sect
    - 1 x Lt (horse-drawn) Sup Col
    - 3 x (mot) Hy Batteries
    - 2 x (mot) Lt Batteries
- **606th SP Flak Battalion**
  - 1 x SP Staff Sect
    - 3 x SP Flak Coys
- **Luftwaffe**
  - 2.(H)/14 Pz Recce Staffel
- **605th Panzerjäger Battalion**
  - 1 x Armd Staff Sect
    - 1 x (mot) Sig Det
    - 3 x SP Panzerjäger Coys

Official tank strength at February 1941

PzKpfw I	25
PzKpfw II	45
PzKpfw III	75
PzKpfw IV	20
Total	165

the Gulf of Sirte and Tripoli and eliminating all Italian forces from North Africa. But fortune changed all this. With stretched lines of communication and the need to resupply and repair damaged equipment, O'Connor was ordered by General Sir Archibald Wavell, the British C-in-C, to rest and replenish for two weeks. Thus it was not until 4 February that the advance was resumed, with Benghazi and Beda Fomm taken after spirited fighting on 7 February, and El Agheila secured on 8 February. General O'Connor now planned his final push, scheduled to start on 12 February. His 7th Armoured Division would move along the coast road to take Sirte and then head towards Tripoli, co-ordinating with the possible landing of a British infantry brigade from the sea at Tripoli itself on 20 February, so clearing Tripolitania of the enemy. It would not have been too formidable a task—save for the lengthened supply lines —for the remaining Italian forces were demoralised, disorganised and poorly equipped.

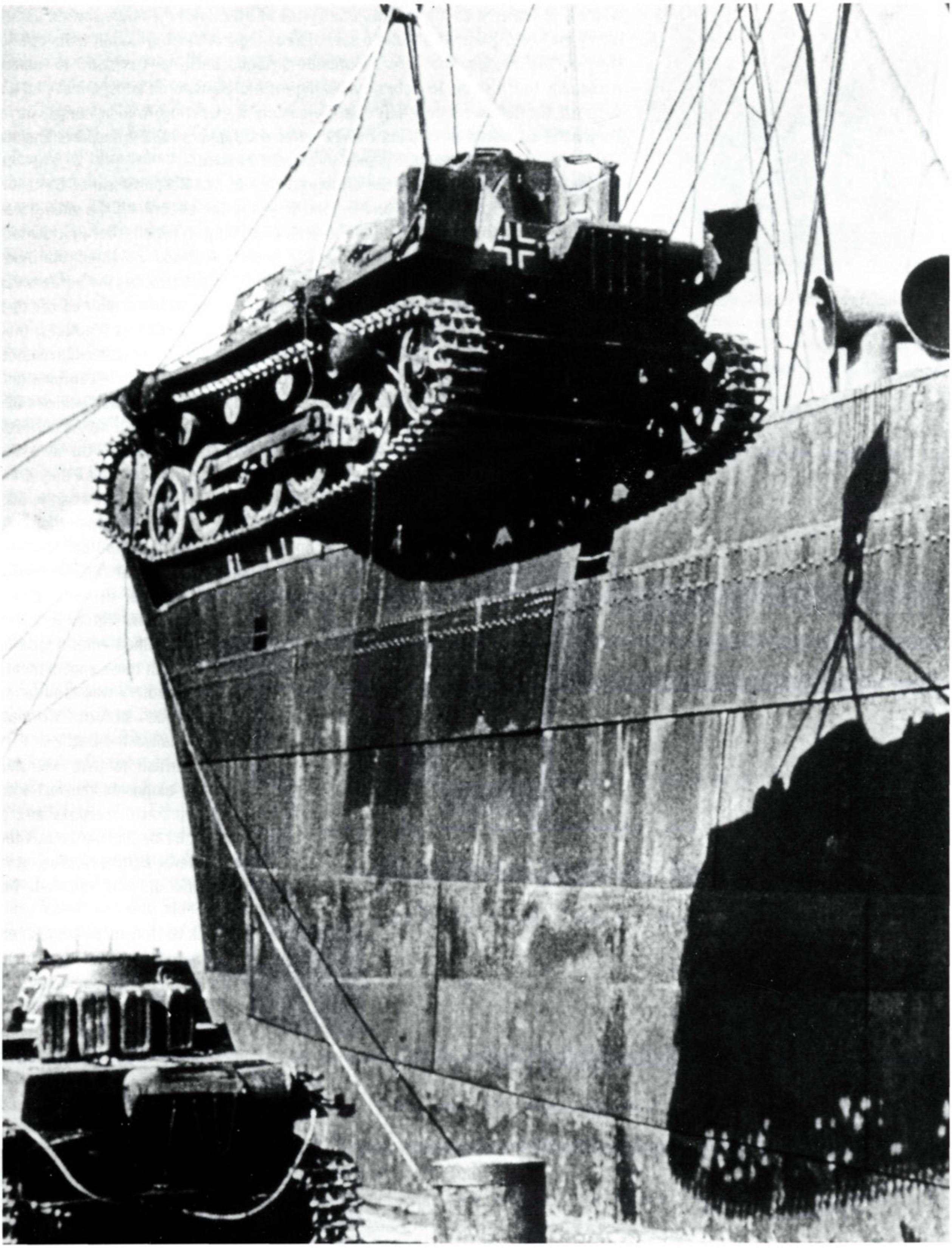
However, at the end of January 1941 the British government was asked by the Greek government for urgent assistance against the threat of a German invasion. As a result, Prime Minister Churchill asked the Middle East C-in-C to transfer the bulk of the Western Desert Force (by now renamed XIII Corps) to Greece while further operations in Libya were suspended. Despite pleas to be allowed to take Tripoli, Churchill was insistent and on 13 February, the day after Rommel arrived at Tripoli, the Libyan campaign was officially halted, XIII Corps was withdrawn and dispersed. A week later, Cyrenaica Command was set up at little more than brigade strength as an army of occupation.

This mistake was further compounded by complacency. The British Ultra decrypting organisation was reading German signal traffic from the moment Rommel arrived in Tripoli. A key order came from General Halder at OKH telling him not to contemplate any offensive action until May after 15th Panzer Division had arrived in Tripolitania. The British, like OKH, believed this would be the case (so giving the light British forces in Cyrenaica time to train and organise defences), but nobody reckoned with Rommel's own military instincts.

Rommel was surprised by the turn of events by the time he arrived in Tripoli. In his diary he wrote: 'On 8 February leading troops of the British Army occupied El Agheila. Graziani's army had virtually ceased to exist. All that remained of it were a few lorry columns and hordes of unarmed soldiers in full flight to the west. If Wavell had now continued his advance into Tripolitania no resistance worthy of the name could be mounted against him.'

There was no time for 5th Light to relax and all arrangements, including provision of tropical clothing and briefing the troops about conditions in North Africa, were done literally at the last minute—on the ships crossing to Tripoli. The hastily produced supply of reed-green cotton uniforms—breeches, shirt and tunic —and cork sun helmets were worn for the first time after the men landed. For publicity purposes, Rommel had the first arrivals (3rd Reconnaissance Battalion) parade in front of the Governor's Palace in Tripoli as soon as they were landed. Because there were so few of them, Rommel had each platoon go around the corner and tag on again at the back, four times, so that for newsreel cameras and photographers the force appeared much bigger than it actually was. As the tanks were not due to arrived for some time, he engaged all the local carpenters to make 200 dummy wooden tanks and placed them on commandeered car chassis so that any photo-recce operations by the British would assume that a massive armoured force was already present. In fact, it would be another month before 5th Light's tank component (5th Panzer Regiment) would be in place, and logically Rommel would conserve his forces until then. However, the expected British advance into Tripolitania did not happen, so Rommel decided to test out the opposition without

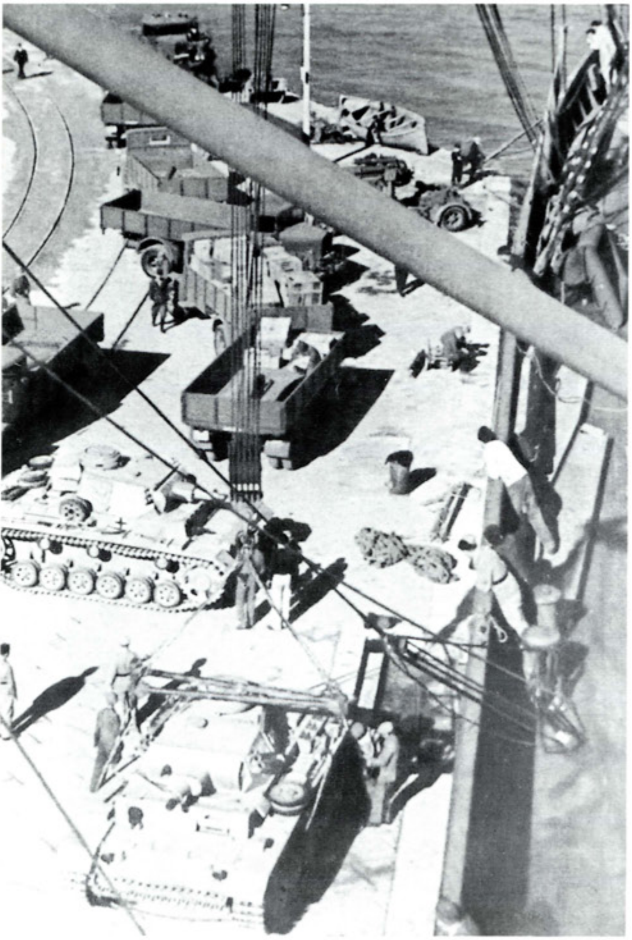
Right: PzKpfw I Ausf A of 5th Panzer Regiment is hoisted ashore from a transport on arrival at Tripoli, still in grey European camouflage finish.



waiting. Together with his chief adjutant, Rudolf Schmundt, he made several flights along the coast towards Sirte and saw disorganised retreating Italian units but no sign of the British. He sent Schmundt straight back to Germany to report personally to Hitler on 19 February, asking for more anti-tank guns, mines and air support. The latter request was met personally by Goering, who arranged for a composite squadron of Heinkel He111 bombers, Junkers Ju52 transports and six Fieseler Fi156 Storch spotter planes to be sent at once.

Meanwhile, Rommel sent the armoured cars of 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion along the coast road to Sirte and beyond to probe the enemy—if the enemy was there. It was on 20 February, within a week of landing in Tripoli, that first contact was made, on the Tripolitania-Cyrenaica border. A troop of three Marmon-Harrington armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards, patrolling the border near El Agheila, spotted on an opposite hilltop a big eight-wheeled armoured car of a type they'd never seen before. Reaching the coast road at 15.00hrs they encountered near the border fort a platoon of three of the eight-wheeled armoured cars—Sd Kfz 232s—together with an armed truck and a motorcycle combination. Fire was exchanged and the British cars tried to outflank the German vehicles but got stuck in the sand. By the time they got out the Germans had gone. As dusk fell they moved back along the coast road and saw another armoured car near the border fort blocking the road. They presumed this to be British, but as they drew close they saw it was another Sd Kfz 232. There was an exchange of fire as the cars raced away. On 24 February there was another clash when the same British armoured car troop again approached the border fort and was ambushed by another platoon of 3rd Recce Battalion who were hidden in wait. In the close range exchange of fire one of the Marmon-Harrington cars was knocked out and its crew taken prisoner, while the driver of another car was killed—first blood to 5th Light. The British troop commander in both these engagements was Lt E. T. Williams who later (as a Brigadier) was famous as General Montgomery's chief intelligence officer. German propaganda made great play of what they called the Battle of Fort El Agheila, but this also prompted the British to take offensive action. They started to set up an ambush alongside the fort with 25pdr and 2pdr anti-tank guns, heavy infantry weapons and a minefield in the road, but they were spotted by the Germans, They called in an air strike that knocked several British vehicles and caused major casualties before the mission was aborted. No German ground forces were seen.

Below: Some of the follow-up shipments of tanks later in 1941 arrived already painted in desert camouflage, as shown on these newly landed PzKpfw IIIs. The wheeled transport, however, is still in field grey finish.



At dawn on 2 March, 5th Light struck back with an ambush on the coast road. They now had the first '88' to arrive in North Africa, and this was well sited to pick off approaching British vehicles. The leading Marmon-Harrington armoured car was attacked, cut off and blocked by two 3rd Recce eight-wheel armoured cars, and its crew captured. They were surprised to find themselves being interviewed shortly afterwards by Generalmajor Streich, the divisional commander, who was personally directing this operation and had occupied the border fort.

Meanwhile Rommel had ordered the rest of 5th Light to move up the coast road of the Gulf of Sirte towards the Cyrenaica border. By mid-March 8,000 men of the division had landed as had all the tanks of 5th Panzer Regiment. British patrols on 28 March saw the first German tanks approaching the border and one of them ran over one of the British mines, killing two crewmen—the first casualties in 5th Light. By now the Italian Ariete Division, a fresh armoured formation, had been put under Rommel's command and events were about to speed up.

There was still wariness on both sides in early March 1941. British intelligence now thought a limited German advance was likely in early April, information gleaned by Ultra from German signal traffic. The King's Dragoon Guards, who held the Cyrenaica frontier area, were told to make a fighting withdrawal if that happened. At the same time, Rommel was still worried that the British would resume their offensive and push into Tripolitania. He sent a report to OKH on 9 March stating that he preferred to attack the British sooner rather than later to avoid the really hot weather of June, though he was still prepared to await the arrival of 15th Panzer Division before he made a move. At this stage he only contemplated attempting to take Cyrenaica, not least because of problems of supply and lines of communications. OKH thinking at that time was that moving beyond Cyrenaica into Egypt would best be put off until autumn 1941 when the hoped-for conquest of Russia should be completed, thus freeing many more troops and tanks for North Africa. On 20 March Rommel flew back to Berlin to report on progress. The Army C-in-C, von Brauchitsch, took a typically cautious view, suggesting that with 15th Panzer in place, DAK could strike out for Agedabia using that as a base for any further advances. At that stage OKH was sure that there must still be powerful British armoured divisions in place in Cyrenaica.

The fighting patrols of late February and March, which had led to only a limited British response, convinced Rommel that a modest offensive advance was possible, certainly now that 5th Light Division had the tanks of 5th Panzer Regiment. He ordered Generalmajor Streich to mount a set-piece attack by 5th Light on 31 March to take the Mersa Brega gap, which was the key to the coastal route into Cyrenaica.

The British forces available to guard Mersa Brega amounted to little more than the newly arrived 2nd Armoured Division, which had just replaced the experienced 7th Armoured Division. 2nd Armoured was under strength, not fully trained or acclimatised, short of transport and armed with a motley mix of older cruiser tanks, light tanks and captured M13 Italian tanks, not all of them radio-equipped. Nonetheless, when 5th Light launched its attack, the attackers had a hard time of it. A regiment of 25pdrs held off two attacks by 5th Panzer Regiment tanks, damaging several, and forcing others off the road into the sand where they got stuck. Even Streich's command post was almost made untenable by accurate 25pdr fire. Streich called in Stukas to try to dislodge the effective British batteries but the British gunners held fast. Streich realised that if the British put in a counter-attack with tanks at that moment, 5th Light would have to withdraw.

Fortunately, nothing like that happened, and at dusk Streich had the idea of sending 8th Machine Gun Battalion up the coast, through the sand dunes beyond the coast road, to get behind and attack the British right flank. This unexpected surprise assault at night caused mayhem in the British rear and the British commander quickly pulled out. Streich was surprised and delighted at this successful outcome, and without reference to his corps commander he send his tanks, 3rd Recce Battalion, the two machine gun battalions and his only artillery—12 guns—in close pursuit. He gleefully told Major Hauser, his 1a (see page 10), that they were going to Agedabia, and they moved so fast the next day that some of the German tanks caught up, cut off and ran amok among the British rear units who were still withdrawing to Agedabia. Three German tanks were lost in this

Above: The crew of one of 5th Panzer Regiment's PzKpfw IIIs takes a meal break parked at the roadside. Note the jerricans of fuel or water and the spare wheels carried on the track covers.

Official tank strength at end March 1941

PzKpfw I	25
PzKpfw II	45
PzKpfw III	71
PzKpfw IV	20
Total	161

action and two broke down, but a numerically small number of German tanks, only 12 at the finish, caused much damage and chaos. An immediate lesson learned was that the 2pdr guns on the British cruiser tanks could not penetrate a German PzKpfw III at 1,000m (c3,000ft), but at the same range the 50mm gun of the German tank could penetrate the thickest front armour of a British cruiser tank. This valuable lesson was put to good use in the weeks and months ahead.

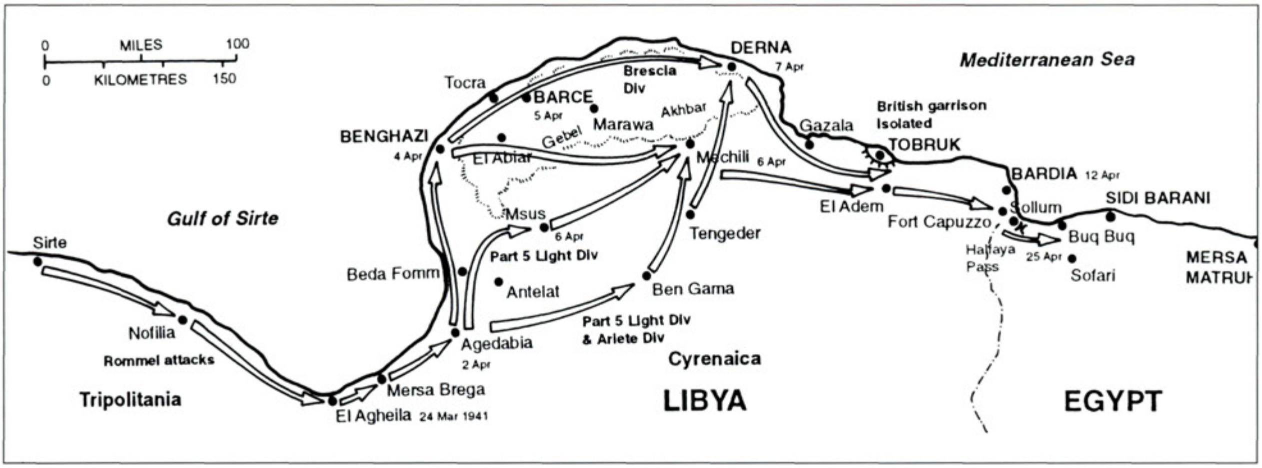
The British now abandoned Agedabia, leaving it in Streich's hands, and withdrew fast in the direction of Antelat (inland) and Beda Fomm along the coast. Though Rommel is generally credited with this swift advance that set the German offensive moving, he only found out about it after it happened. It was Streich's initiative as a divisional commander (and drawing on his experience as a tank regiment commander in France in 1940) that got the advance started, though it was approved by Rommel in retrospect when he saw the opportunity that the move provided. Air reconnaissance now showed British units moving east generally. So on 3 April, the day after the capture of Agedabia, Rommel decided that the British had no determination to stand and fight. He realised now that he had the chance to keep the momentum going and take the whole of Cyrenaica in one bold operation.

British misfortunes were compounded by several further command decisions. General O'Connor had been succeeded by Lt-Gen Phillip Neame VC, an officer of great reputation but with no previous experience of the desert. The battle-hardened 7th Armoured Division had been withdrawn to Egypt and replaced by the newly formed 2nd Armoured Division, which together with its commander, Maj-Gen M. D. Gambier-Parry, was fresh from England. Because of the complacent assumption that no big German offensive would begin before May, the British C-in-C, Wavell, had given written orders to Neame that in the event of any German light probing, his forces were to withdraw and yield the ground. Neame obeyed this order quite literally and ordered his forces to pull back when the first German forces appeared on 31 March—but the speed and zeal of Rommel's advance meant that what in normal circumstances might have been an orderly withdrawal, soon became a chaotic rout.

Below: Rommel's map caravan, still in the markings for the Polish campaign of 1939, and his Sd Kfz 251/6 command vehicle, still in French campaign markings, parked on the beach at El Agheila during the opening stages of the advance into Cyrenaica. Note the camouflage from local beach plants added on top of each vehicle.

Rommel had organised his relatively meagre forces to cover every possible route into Cyrenaica. The armoured cars of 5th Light's hard-worked 3rd Recce Battalion were sent racing up the coast road towards Benghazi, which they reached that same evening of 3 April. To their surprise they found it abandoned with the military stores burning and the two brigades of Australian infantry who were based there already departed, following orders, and joining the general retreat eastwards.

In a typically unorthodox move, Rommel contacted Generalmajor Heinrich Kirchheim, a staff officer from OKH on a fact-finding tour of Libya, and put him in charge of some assorted units of the Italian Brescia Division to follow up the 3rd Recce Battalion and carry on round the coast road to Derna. Meanwhile, Generalmajor Streich took


0 MILES 100
0 KILOMETRES 150
Mediterranean Sea
Gulf of Sirte
Sirte
Nofilia
Rommel attacks
Tripolitania
El Agheila 24 Mar 1941
Mersa Brega
Agedabia 2 Apr
Beda Fomm
Antelat
Msus 6 Apr
Part 5 Light Div
BENGHAZI 4 Apr
El Abiar
Tocra
BARCE 5 Apr
Brescia Div
Marawa
Gebel Akhbar
DERNA 7 Apr
Mechili 6 Apr
Tengeder
Ben Gama
Part 5 Light Div & Ariete Div
Cyrenaica
LIBYA
Gazala
British garrison isolated
TOBRUK
El Adem
BARDIA 12 Apr
Fort Capuzzo
Sollum
Halfaya Pass 25 Apr
SIDI BARANI
Buq Buq
Sofari
MERSA MATRUH
EGYPT

Above: The advance into Egypt: operations in March/April 1941.

the remaining units of the division across a southerly route towards Tobruk, though on 5 April they were ordered to divert to Mechili instead. Some units of the Italian Ariete Division were also under command.

From the main body, 8th Machine Gun Battalion, commanded by Oberstleutnant Gustav Ponath, was sent northwards towards Mechili and Derna in a 450km (280-mile) dash to cut the coast road west of Tobruk, and a detachment of 5th Panzer Regiment, under its commander Oberst Olrich, plus the 2nd Machine Gun Battalion, the artillery and some Italian Ariete Division tanks, went north to head for Mechili via Msus where there was known to be a British supply dump. From Benghazi a 5th Light force, commanded by Oberst Gerhard Graf von Schwerin, comprising the 3rd Recce Battalion, the Panzerjäger battalions and some Italian Ariete Division tanks, headed due east towards Mechili skirting the southern edge of the Gebel Akhbar. Thus every possible route across Cyrenaica was being taken by 5th Light Division and Italian troops and all were converging on Mechili and Derna with Tobruk as an objective beyond.

The region called the Gebel Akhbar was a key feature of Cyrenaica, a hilly region with some fertile areas which restricted possible transport routes to the coastal area to the north or the desert hinterland to the south. Rommel speedily set up a Tactical HQ (*Führungsstaffel*) in the sand dunes at Agedabia where his map caravan, command half-tracks and support vehicles were based. From here, too, he could operate his newly arrived Storch liaison aircraft. Supplies were always going to be a problem in desert operations, and Rommel ordered the setting up of a major forward supply dump on the Via Balbia coast road near 'Marble Arch' (actually the Arco Philaenorum), the grand archway which Mussolini had built at El Agheila on the Tripolitania-Cyrenaica border.

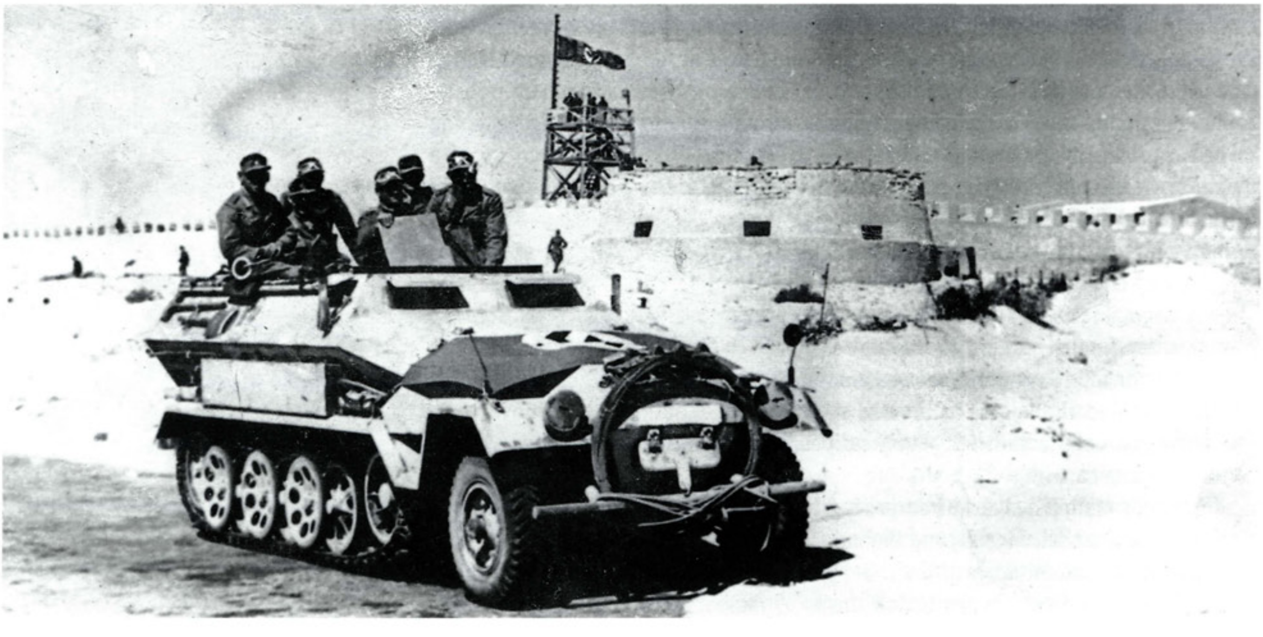
Streich's column was heading for Ben Gania on the following day, 4 April, and already beginning to run out of fuel and water. He had his first clash with Rommel over this, for Streich wanted to wait for a supply column, which might well have taken three or four days. Rommel was enraged at this lack of urgency and ordered Streich to unload all his own trucks and send them back to Marble Arch overnight and there 'to collect sufficient fuel, rations, and ammunition for the advance through Cyrenaica within 24 hours'.

Rommel's fast offensive was surprising his own side as well as the British. His divisional commander, Streich, and the individual regimental and unit commanders were urged on, often against their better judgement and usually by Rommel dropping literally from the sky to tell them, for he was using his Storch aircraft incessantly over the battlefield. If he didn't actually land alongside a unit he flew low over it and dropped a hand-written message. Even Hitler was upstaged. On 3 April he sent a telegram to Rommel reminding him not to launch any large scale offensive until the 15th Panzer Division was in place, and not to expose his flank by advancing to Benghazi. But by the time this telegram was was received Benghazi had already been occupied by 3rd Recce Battalion and the three-pronged offensive was already under way across the Cyrenaica 'Bulge'. When the Italian General Gariboldi, nominally the area commander and senior to Rommel, questioned the wisdom of what he was doing, Rommel simply told him the opportunity was too good to miss!

British fortunes were aggravated by poor and confused communications (or sometimes none at all), the ever-troubling shortage of fuel which caused some tanks to be abandoned, and faulty intelligence or misinterpretation of events. A major mistake occurred on 3 April when a large enemy column was reported to be heading for Msus, a major fuel dump. The fuel was destroyed and the post abandoned, but the 'enemy force' was then discovered to be a returning patrol of the Long Range Desert Group. On the same day, 5th Royal Tank Regiment (RTR) were ordered to engage approaching 'enemy tanks' near Antelat but these turned out to be 6RTR withdrawing to the same position.

On 6 April 5th Panzer Regiment and units under command took Msus, with its romantic 'Beau Geste' fort already abandoned by the British and headed on for Mechili. Between Msus and Mechili, however, the going got rough. Fuel was running out and the stony ground to the south of the Gebel Akhbar played havoc with the tank tracks, so only a few tanks, trucks and halftracks made it unscathed to Mechili. Streich's main party suffered similarly, largely due to shortage of fuel for the tanks. By the time it reached Mechili, Streich had left his tank detachment behind because of breakdowns or lack of fuel, and the heaviest equipment he had with him were a few of the trucks armed with 20mm flak guns. Von Schwerin's 3rd Recce and units under command, coming across from Benghazi, were similarly afflicted. One good reason for all this, of course, is that all the vehicles, from trucks to tanks, had been designed for European conditions and not for the extremes of

Below: The British strongholds of Msus and Mechili, both 'Beau Geste' style forts, were swiftly captured by the DAK's desert columns. Here an Sd Kfz 251 halftrack is seen at Msus with a battalion commander and his staff, while the German flag is hoisted on the fort in the background.



Left: Hard going over the Gebel Akhbar's rocky slopes for one of the small Sd Kfz 222 armoured cars during the advance on Mechili in April 1941.

heat, sand and rock they were now traversing, nor for the very long distances being travelled.

Rommel, buzzing over the area in his Storch, was frustrated by the delays. He had noted British forces gathering around Mechili and was keen to get among them. He landed alongside Streich on the late afternoon of April 6 to urge the division on, and was very displeased at the excuses for the delays. He flew off to find the stragglers and the next day the surviving runners of Streich's tank detachment, a PzKpfw IV and seven PzKpfw IIs, caught up, as did an artillery battery of the Italian Ariete Division which Rommel had rounded up. Von Schwerin's 3rd Recce Battalion finally caught up, too, on 7 April and by that evening a somewhat reduced 5th Light Division had finally drawn up on the low hills looking down on the fort at Mechili. Rommel was in better mood. In the gathering dusk he landed his Storch alongside Streich's command car and shouted, 'Tomorrow we attack.'

What had undoubtedly lifted Rommel's spirits was an unexpected coup on the night of 6/7 April. Because of the disarray among the British forces, Wavell had sent General O'Connor up from Egypt, where he had been on leave, to advise General Neame. They met at Marua, a British base in the Gebel Akhbar, to confer with Maj-Gen Leslie Morshead, commander of 9th Australian Infantry Division, whose brigades had been stretched between Benghazi and Tobruk. Spirited resistance by an Australian infantry battalion had held up the 3rd Recce Battalion for a day east of Benghazi. O'Connor suggested a defence line be set up between Mechili and Gazala, and Morshead set off east in his staff car past Derna and on to Gazala. Neame and O'Connor followed a short time later in another staff car, but in the dark the driver took a wrong turning and ran into the leading troops of Ponath's 8th Machine Gun Battalion who had just arrived on the outskirts of Derna. The Germans were surprised to find they had captured the two senior British generals in Cyrenaica, and they went on to capture quite a few more British troops that night including a complete mobile field hospital and the commander and some staff officers of 3rd Armoured Brigade.

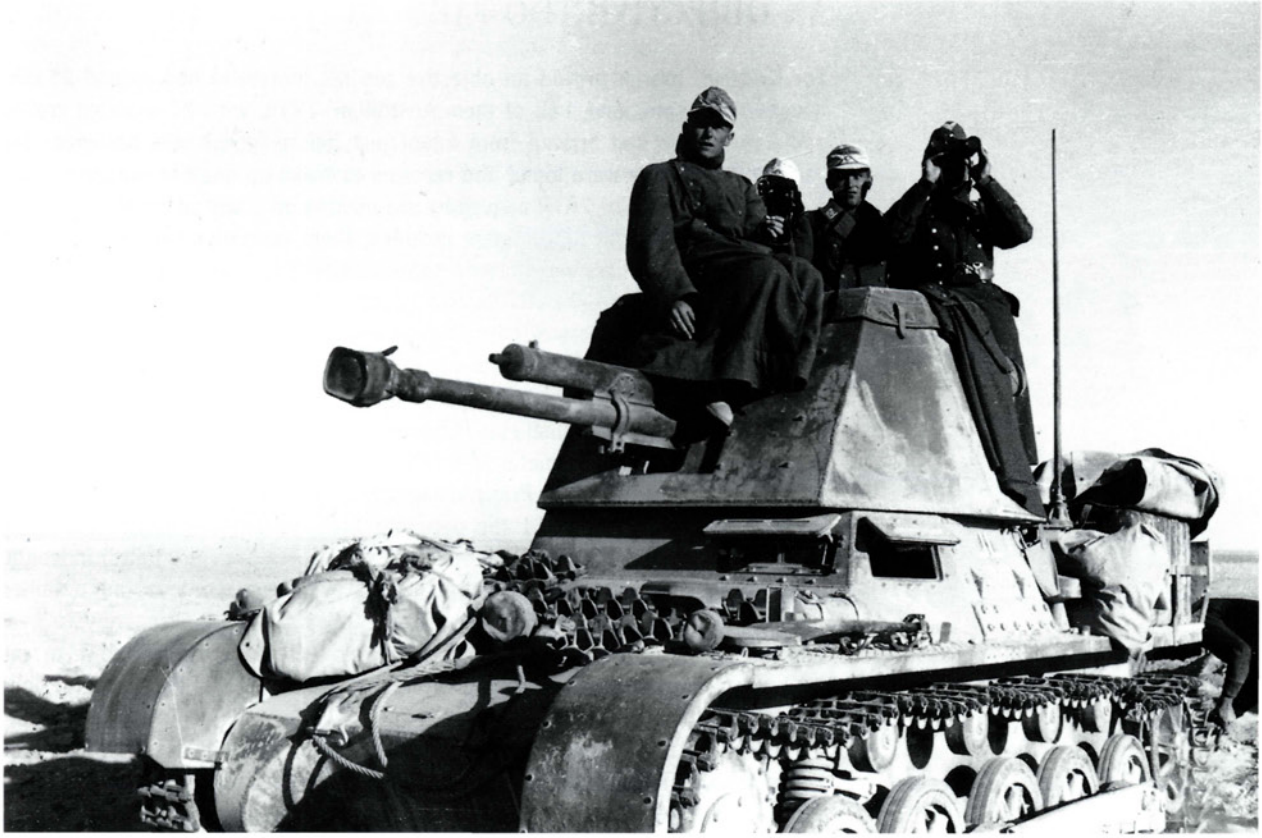
Seeking to take Derna airfield, 8th Machine Gun Battalion were counter-attacked, first by the armoured cars of the King's Dragoon Guards who were withdrawing east, then on the afternoon of 7 April by the remnants of 5RTR whose few remaining A13 cruiser tanks were lost in the engagement, though not before knocking out several 8th Battalion vehicles.

By rights 8th Machine Gun Battalion was too weak and tired to achieve success at Derna, but they were undoubtedly helped by the demoralisation and confusion of the British. This certainly helped the next day when Streich's much depleted main force put in its attack on Mechili. The base was actually held by 3rd Indian Motor Brigade, but Maj-Gen Gambier-Parry had also moved in his 2nd Armoured Division HQ and support units, and ordered the remnants of 3rd Armoured Brigade to join them. On the evening of 7 April, however, Gambier-Parry received orders to pull out of Mechili at dawn the next day and withdraw eastwards on Tobruk. At that time 2nd Armoured Division was down to its last tank, an A13 cruiser of divisional HQ.

As soon as the British started to move out things went wrong for them, for 5th Light was waiting to attack. A company of 3rd Indian Motor Brigade was first out, but it ran into an artillery column of the Italian Ariete Division emplaced to the east. The Indians dispersed the Italians with a bayonet charge, but they soon regrouped and destroyed the sole A13 tank as soon as it appeared, leading a British motorised column. The column moved on but right into the path of Streich's divisional HQ, whose personnel, including Streich, engaged it with small-arms fire and the truck-mounted 20mm cannon. While this was happening, Streich's small tank force attacked from the side. A lucky shot by a courageous 2pdr anti-tank gun crew knocked out the sole PzKpfw IV, hitting the tank's undersides as it climbed the anti-tank mound around the fort. The attacking force now comprised only the seven PzKpfw IIs and a few trucks carrying infantry, but some of the trucks were fitted with rakes to raise extra dust and sand—not only to to conceal them from enemy gunners but to make the force look much bigger than it actually was. Over all this dust and gunfire flew Rommel in his Storch. Gambier-Parry, viewing the apparent size of the attacking force and the confusion all around him, decided to surrender, though several groups—including one column of 60 vehicles—managed to break out and make a run for it to Tobruk or Sollum. Over 2,000 British and Indian troops were captured at Mechili, though not before the British had set fire to the fuel dump. The smoke from this, however, acted as a beacon for the many small elements of 5th Light who were struggling to catch up, broken down vehicles, tanks awaiting fuel, and the like.

Rommel's own mobility in his Storch caused problems for his staff. On 7 April it became clear from intelligence reports to Rommel's chief of staff and operations officer at the Tactical HQ in Agedabia that the ad hoc and disorganised assembly of British forces at Mechili offered no threat to the advance and could be bypassed for the more important objective of Tobruk. But they could not pass this appreciation on

Below: Rommel swooped over the battlefield in his Storch liaison aircraft, landing to direct operations when he needed to. Here he talks with his personal Luftwaffe pilot, soon after the capture of Mechili.



to their chief who was flying here, there and everywhere in his Storch, completely out of touch with Tactical HQ. So they sent Rommel's ADC, Lt H. W. Schmidt, in another Storch either to track down Rommel or, failing that, to reach Generalmajor Streich and pass the order straight to him. However, Schmidt himself got lost (there were sandstorms about) and did not arrive at Streich's divisional HQ until the early morning of 8 April, by which time the attack on Mechili was already under way. Commentators on the desert war have speculated that, had Rommel not lost touch with his Tactical HQ and received the staff's advice, the outcome of the Cyrenaica campaign might have been even more successful, culminating in the speedy capture of Tobruk, which in the event did not happen.

On the positive side, in spite of the burning of the fuel, the taking of Mechili did yield a good supply of stores and rations and vehicles to boost Afrika Korps stocks. Included in the haul were two AEC armoured command trucks, one of which was appropriated by Rommel for his personal use and named *Mammut* (mammoth).

Prudently, Johannes Streich requested two days for rest and maintenance before proceeding, but Rommel ordered him to press straight on to Tobruk no matter what the state of the men or equipment, 'Every man and vehicle that can move, must move.' However, a fierce sandstorm raged on 9 and 10 April and severely restricted movement and reconnaissance. This did not stop the Australian and British troops who were in Tobruk, with General Morshead as garrison commander, working non-stop to make good the defences on the perimeter. Morshead took a typically tough line, promising a policy of 'no surrender, no retreat' to his unit commanders.

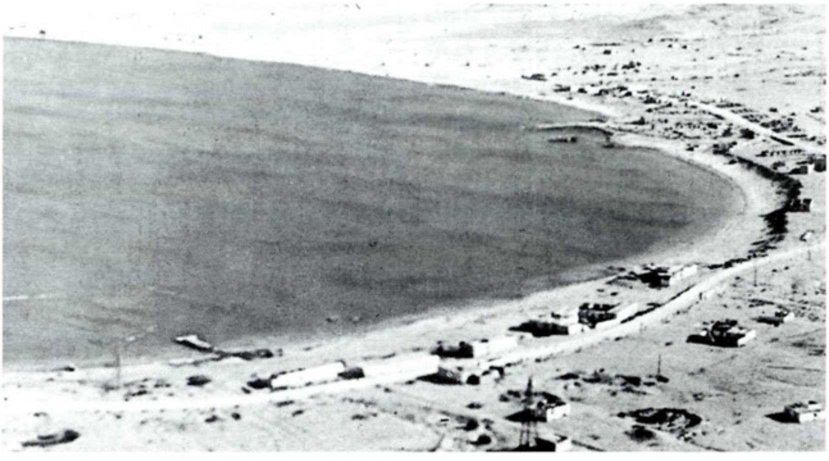
Above: Evenings and nights could be cold in the desert and the army overcoat was welcome wear, as shown by the crew of this self-propelled 4.7cm *Pak(t) (Sf) auf PzKpfw I Ausf B* of 605th Panzerjäger Battalion in April 1941.

AN OBJECTIVE TOO FAR

For Rommel, Tobruk proved an objective too far. Morshead had around 25,000 troops under command, half of them Australian. 1RTR, with 27 assorted cruiser and light tanks, had arrived from Egypt just before Tobruk was besieged, and various other tanks were found and repaired to make up another squadron. After a week, a squadron of 7RTR arrived by sea making up a unit of 14 Matilda tanks when those already at Tobruk were included. There were also the surviving KDG armoured cars. Artillery was better provided for with four field regiments with 72 25pdrs in all, and further batteries had 18pdr and 60pdr guns.

The town and seaport of Tobruk lay at the foot of a low natural escarpment emanating from the eastern foothills of the Gebel Akhbar. The Italians had built an anti-tank ditch all round the landward perimeter up on the escarpment, reinforced with barbed wire and minefields. Concrete emplacements had been built in a double row inside the perimeter with others sited at the heads of the many wadis worn into the escarpment. Priority had been given to repairing the perimeter defences so that by April 11 the perimeter was reasonably complete and fully covered by infantry. The perimeter was a considerable 45km (30 miles) in length, and the garrison troops were fully stretched guarding it. As there was only a limited number of anti-tank guns available—all 2pdrs of limited value—there was great dependency on the 25pdrs to hold off enemy tanks. The plan was to hold them well back, so that if any German armour broke through it could be engaged over open sights.

Rommel sent Ponath's 8th Machine Gun Battalion on along the coast road from Derna towards Tobruk, but for two days (9 and 10 April) they were forced to fight for every inch of the way against a determined Australian rearguard backed up by KDG's armoured cars. Rommel had the idea of shelling the Tobruk port area from the west if he could find a high enough gun position. He asked Generalmajor Kirchheim, who had been shepherding along the the units from the Italian Brescia Division, to go forward to find a suitable position. While doing so, his car was strafed by an RAF fighter coming in over the coast and Kirchheim was wounded. As it happened the newly arrived commander of 15th Panzer Division, Generalmajor Heinrich von Prittwitz und Gaffron, had arrived on the scene to see the battlefront while he awaited the arrival of his division. Rommel asked him to take Kirchheim's place. Von Prittwitz did so, but his car was completely destroyed when he was ambushed, just 6km (less than four miles) from Tobruk by the



Right: The coast road between Bardia and Sollum at the time of the German advance in April 1941, as photographed from a German aircraft.

Above: The PzKpfw III was numerically the most important tank used by DAK. Here a PzKpfw III Ausf H with retrospectively fitted extra frontal armour is seen during Rommel's big offensive of January 1942, which resulted in the retaking of most of Cyrenaica. The white colour of the Afrika Korps symbol—just visible on the front of the vehicle—indicates this is a tank of 5th Panzer Regiment.

Australian rearguard who were using a captured Italian 47mm anti-tank gun. Von Prittwitz died in this attack and 15th Panzer Division had lost its commander even before the main units had arrived in North Africa.

The next day, 11 April, the German attack began. The 3rd Recce Battalion was detached and sent down the coast road east to the border to seize the remainder of Cyrenaica. With them went reinforcements in the shape of three motorcycle companies from 15th Panzer Division's recce battalion. This had been the first 15th Panzer unit to arrive and had been sent immediately on the long haul from Tripoli up to the front. The motorcycle companies took Bardia on 12 April and Sollum, Capuzzo and Halfaya Pass on the 13th to secure the Cyrenaica-Egypt border. Meanwhile, 2nd Machine Gun Battalion, with attached flak and artillery companies, was sent to block the road and hinterland east of Tobruk to prevent any breakout in that direction.

The balance of 5th Light, under Streich's command, comprised the few remaining tanks of 5th Panzer Regiment, a few Italian M13 tanks, the remaining field guns (eight in all and low on ammunition), the rest of the flak units, and 8th Machine Gun Battalion, which had been moved round from the Derna area. This force approached the perimeter from the south, trying the same trick of a heavy dust cloud as had been used at Mechili. But the attack was a failure. It came under heavy artillery fire and the infantrymen of 8th Machine Gun Battalion found it difficult to dig-in on the rocky ground. Cover was poor and casualties were high under the merciless artillery fire. Only the coming of darkness gave some relief. The tanks could do no better than run along the perimeter wire, taking pot shots at the defences, and at one point they were engaged across the wire by cruiser tanks of 1RTR. The major drawback to 5th Light's offensive capability at that moment was lack of artillery, virtually none of which was effective.

Right: This anti-tank ditch formed part of the perimeter defences of Tobruk, as did the extensive barbed wire entanglements seen in the background.

On the following day, 12 April, 5th Light's tanks tried again. Passing through the positions of 8th Machine Gun Battalion at 11.00hrs they reached the wire, again without artillery support, but could not cross the anti-tank ditch, and therefore withdrew. On the following day, Easter Sunday, 13 April, Rommel carried out a leaflet raid over Tobruk, telling the 'British' forces to surrender: '. . . soldiers signalling with a white handkerchief will not be fired on. Strong German forces have surrounded Tobruk. There is no point in trying to escape. Remember Mechili. Our bombers and Stukas lie in wait for your ships in the harbour.'

This bluff got nowhere, for by now it must have been obvious to Tobruk's defenders that the Germans were thinly spread with hardly enough forces to patrol the 45km (30-mile) perimeter, let alone attack it effectively. Also Rommel did not know that there had been a change of policy, and far from trying to escape, the defenders were there to stay.

Rommel now had an argument with Streich over the interpretation of air recce photos and intelligence reports. Rommel thought the forces in Tobruk were being evacuated by sea; Streich and his 1a, Major Hauser, took the opposite view, thinking that the forces were being reinforced. As it happened they were correct: the small convoy of lighters and ships seen arriving were bringing Matilda tanks, 25pdrs, more stores and ammunition, and more troops; they were not an evacuation fleet. In view of this, Streich thought that yet another attack on the perimeter at present strength would be ineffective and wasteful. Ponath, commanding 8th Machine Gun Battalion, was of the same opinion. His men had already suffered many casualties, and in their present position in front of the wire were still exposed to heavy artillery and small-arms fire from the Australians.

Rommel was enraged at what he called the 'pessimism' of his senior commanders, and decided to take personal charge of the attack planned for next day, 14 April. He promised a 'concentrated artillery' strike to back this attack, which was to start at 18.00hrs in the dusk. However, the artillery support turned out to be just a few 88mm flak guns, certainly powerful and useful, but being emplaced on the flat rocky ground behind 8th Machine Gun Battalion they were fully exposed, with no cover for the crews; consequently, casualties from enemy fire were so heavy that the guns were largely ineffective.

As darkness fell, 8th Machine Gun Battalion under Ponath advanced cautiously and found a gap in the wire which they cleared of mines. Advancing further, they saw nobody, but the bridgehead was tenuous and there were a number of counter-attacks in the dark by small Australian raiding parties which caused 40 casualties. Nonetheless, Rommel thought the penetration of of the perimeter now made a tank attack viable, so he handed operational control back to Streich but detailed his ADC, Lt Schmidt, to stay as a liaison officer with Streich and keep a 'watching brief' on operations.

The tank attack went gravely wrong, however. Streich decided to lead the assault from the top of a PzKpfw II, but as he approached the start line in the dark, the tank and Streich's accompanying Kübelwagen came under artillery and small-arms fire from a British patrol. The Kübelwagen and its driver escaped, but the tank was disabled and Streich and Lt Schmidt had to escape on foot and rejoin the action late. The tank attack itself was a rout in a trap cleverly set up by General Morshead. The bridgehead corridor was under half a mile wide, and the 25pdrs were placed well back at the end of the corridor, with Portee anti-tank guns (guns on the back of lorries to provide mobility) on each flank, and 1RTR on the eastern flank as well. As the German tanks advanced the defenders held fire. Once the Germans were well into the corridor, the British opened up with a withering barrage of 25pdr fire, followed by fire from the flanks. Under this battering the German 5th Panzer Regiment commander, Oberst Olrich, had no real option but to turn and withdraw, leaving behind 17 of the 36 tanks that had started. This withdrawal in turn left 8th Machine Gun Battalion exposed. Ponath—his men running out of ammunition—ordered a fighting withdrawal through the gap. As he led his men back he was killed; later he was awarded a posthumous Knight's Cross for his brave leadership. The battalion by now had only five officers and 92 men left, having lost over 700 in the previous two weeks of action. With Ponath dead, the survivors surrendered to the Australians and the unit was no more.

Rommel blamed both Streich and Olrich for this debacle, and criticised them for not securing the flanks, but in truth they had insufficient infantry to have done this—only the much depleted 8th Machine Gun Battalion—and there was virtually no supporting artillery and too few tanks to sustain the assault. Rommel himself certainly lost some credibility over this unsuccessful attack (though seemingly not with Hitler), for the wounded Generalmajor Kirchheim and other senior officers privately communicated to OKH that continued attacks with DAK at its present low strength would merely deplete and demoralise it further.

Left: Several abortive attempts were made to take Tobruk in April/May 1941. Here a 10.5cm le FH 18/40 L/28 is seen firing against the beleagured garrision during this period.

Above: Infantrymen of 15th Panzer Division leaving a Junkers Ju52 transport that had flown them up to Derna airfield to bolster up the infantry strength of 5th Light Division in April 1941.

Nevertheless, Rommel personally directed another attack on the Tobruk perimeter on 16 April. This time he used Italian forces, tanks of Ariete Division and an infantry regiment of Trente Division. Some officers of 5th Light were attached as advisers, but essentially it was an all-Italian affair. The chosen point was Ras al Madawar, a raised fortified strongpoint on the southwest corner of the perimeter. The attack was a complete fiasco. Many of the M13 tanks broke down on the way from the start line and most others were knocked out. When the Australian defenders counter-attacked, many of the Italian infantry surrendered, and Rommel's HQ troops knocked out two of the retreating Italian tanks thinking them to be captured vehicles used in a counter-attack.

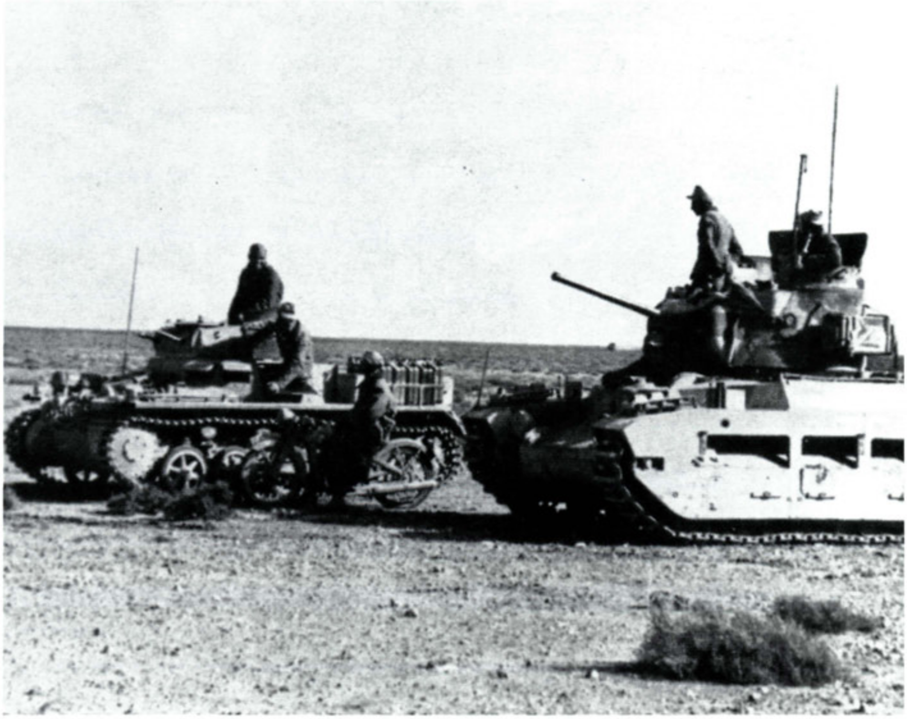
Meanwhile, 5th Light Division was nursing its wounds, trying to repair and overhaul its equipment, and taking some respite for the previous hectic fortnight of combat and movement. With hard work, 5th Panzer Regiment managed to get 74 tanks repaired and running, half of them PzKpfw IIs, the rest PzKpfw IIIs and IVs. Rommel was now trying to beef up the DAK for another attack on Tobruk in force. Further units of 15th Panzer Division arrived in Tripoli, and the infantry regiments of 15th Panzer were flown by Ju52 transport to Derna airfield, then put under command of 5th Light to give much needed infantry support. Artillery had been another priority, and by careful repairs and drawing on Italian equipment, some 35 batteries were scraped together. At that time, also, more Luftwaffe aircraft of all kinds were beginning to arrive to give a boost to air support, though throughout the desert campaign Luftwaffe strength was always vastly outnumbered by the RAF.

The unsuccessful attacks on Tobruk, and the buccaneering taking of Cyrenaica against OKW and OKH advice in the first part of April, were causing alarm amongst the High Command. Army C-in-C von Brauchitsch, and his chief of staff, Halder, were particularly disapproving and regarded Rommel with some disdain, a jumped-up provincial (he was from Schwabia) rather than a 'traditional' Prussian-style officer like themselves. When the complaints from Kirchheim and others reached them, they sent General Friedrich von Paulus, a deputy chief of staff and quartermaster general (later famous as the Sixth Army commander at Stalingrad), out to North Africa to give them a first-hand report on the situation. He arrived on

27 April for a two-week stay, and made a rather conventional report that was more negative than positive. He noted the severe logistics problem. At that time DAK needed 30,000 tons of stores a month just to get going and up to 20,000 tons more if a big strategic reserve was to be built up. Most of the replenishment stores at the time had to be trucked—or occasionally flown—over 1,000 miles from Tripoli, though there were tiny harbours for small cargo boats at Derna and Gazala. Paulus suggested a new defence line at Gazala to reduce the supply distance, and the abandonment of any plans to take Tobruk or advance on to Egypt. He did commend sending out more supplies, more vehicles, more troops and more guns when they could be spared. This report by von Paulus was obviously influenced by his High Command staff thinking and it was what his bosses wanted to hear.

Rommel ignored the commendations. He knew that reinforcing supplies and men would never come in sufficient numbers, and there would be many losses on the way from Sicily to Tripoli because the British dominated the Mediterranean Sea and the skies over it. He was enjoying fame around the world because of his spectacularly fast campaign in Cyrenaica, which was much admired. While von Paulus was in Cyrenaica, he saw first-hand Rommel's next attempt to take Tobruk in a five-day operation from 30 April to 4 May 1941. It proved to be a failure, but was much better controlled and handled than the previous attempts. Once again Rommel had chosen as the point of the attack Ras el Madawar on the southwest corner of the perimeter. Through the night of 30 April/1 May there was an artillery bombardment, and infantry raids with flamethrowers on the forward Australian defensive positions. There was also a fierce bombing raid by Stukas at sunset. By the time dawn broke, the infantry, mainly from 15th Panzer Division, were through the wire and opened up a 2.5km (1.5-mile) breach, backed up by fire from mortars and infantry guns. At first light the first wave of 5th Panzer Regiment tanks went through the gap. About 2.5km (1.5 miles) back from the perimeter gap they noticed a second defence line behind dry stone walls. It concealed the inevitable 25pdr battery. As they approached this, they ran into a minefield which, even worse, was laid in an echelon pattern so that following tanks that veered either right or left also ran into mines. In only minutes all but two of the 22 tanks had lost their tracks and were stuck only about 500 yards in front of the enemy defence line, from where Australian infantry fired on them with small arms. Fortunately, they didn't use the 25pdrs, partly because these tanks were already immobilised and partly because the gunfire set off more mines. The tank company commander ordered some of the immobilised tanks to fire back at the Australians, and he called in other covering fire from the following infantry and assault engineers. Under fire, the tank tracks were repaired and all except five were able to withdraw, though it took until nearly nightfall before the last tank was recovered.

Below: A British Matilda tank captured by 5th Light Division is added to the strength of 5th Panzer Regiment in the early part of the Cyrenaica campaign. Here the Matilda meets a PzKpfw I, probably one of the regimental command tanks. Also present is a motorcycle despatch rider.



Meanwhile, one platoon of tanks had turned left and run westwards inside the perimeter, but these turned back when they were engaged by fire from the 25pdrs behind the dry stone wall. One tank took a direct hit on its engine compartment, and the crew was captured by the Australians from an adjacent defence point. They, in turn, were captured minutes later by the German assault engineers who had seen what had happened and came to the rescue.

Another more significant wave of 34 tanks (mainly PzKpfw IIs but with a few IIIs and IVs) from 5th Panzer Regiment moved forward into the perimeter breach and turned right, putting up a smokescreen as they ran eastwards inside the perimeter, followed by infantry. They engaged and cleared each Australian defence post in turn with heavy fire, under cover of which the infantry attacked. Two squadrons of A13s of 1RTR were brought up from the east to counter-attack, which they did with some success since they were able to fire from hull-down positions. The 5th Panzer Regiment tanks pulled back about midday to refuel and rearm, then returned to the attack. But they were now hammered by the 25pdrs behind the stone defence line, then counter-attacked again by the A13s, plus some Matildas from 7RTR. In a considerable melee, four British tanks were lost and others severely damaged, but the German tank company also suffered losses and damage, and at nightfall they withdrew back to the Ras al Madawar position. By this time only half of the 5th Panzer Regiment's 70 tanks that went into action that day were still battleworthy, and 5th Light had lost 1,200 dead and wounded, many of these

Below: Desert living conditions could be harsh. Here is a tented camp, better placed than some for it is in the sand dunes near the sea somewhere near the coast road in Cyrenaica.

Deutsches
Soldatenkino
BENGASI

Above: Once Benghazi was captured, it became an important German command and supply centre since it had some port facilities. For German troops off duty there was a cinema that was a popular attraction.

from the newly arrived 15th Panzer Division infantry unit that had been under command. This was such a costly battle that Rommel could not sustain his attack. He realised that Tobruk was too tough a nut to crack without more forces. Though he held on to the Ras al Madawar position for some months to remind the Tobruk garrison of the DAK's presence, the key units of 5th Light withdrew to lick their wounds, and for the next ten days there was a lull in the action.

OPERATION 'BREVITY'

Ultra intercepts gave the British C-in-C, General Wavell, the contents of the von Paulus report which had been transmitted to OKW in Germany on 12 May. In addition reports from Tobruk indicated how weak the DAK appeared to be. The apparent prospects looked good for the British. If the von Paulus recommendations were acted upon, the DAK would pull back to Gazala and it still did not have all of 15th Panzer Division in place to strengthen it. On 13 May, therefore, Wavell ordered an offensive—Operation 'Brevity'—to start on 15 May. This was to be commanded by Brigadier W. H. E. ('Strafer') Gott. He had already had a clash with Combat Group Knabe—the small force named after its commander, comprising 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion and 15th Motorcycle Battalion, sent in early April to secure the Cyrenaica-Egypt frontier. On 25 April this small group had launched a bold attack against Gott's small frontier guard force, which drew back to Buq Buq leaving the Halfaya Pass in German hands.

For Operation 'Brevity' Gott had under command 22nd Guards (Motorised) Brigade, artillery, 11th Hussars, 7th Armoured Division Support Group, 2RTR and 4RTR which together made up 7th Armoured Brigade. The main units involved had to make a 100-mile move up from Mersa Matruh. The ambitious objective was to sweep the German forces from the border, join up with the Tobruk garrison, and use that as a springboard to push the DAK further west. But it was an embarrassing failure for Rommel had under his command a very effective Wireless Intercept Section (*Fernmeldeaufklärung*) commanded by an astute expert in his field, Lt Seebohm, who time and again was was able to interpret British intentions by good monitoring of the radio traffic. By this means Rommel got wind of the British moves and ordered 5th Light's tanks to the frontier area.

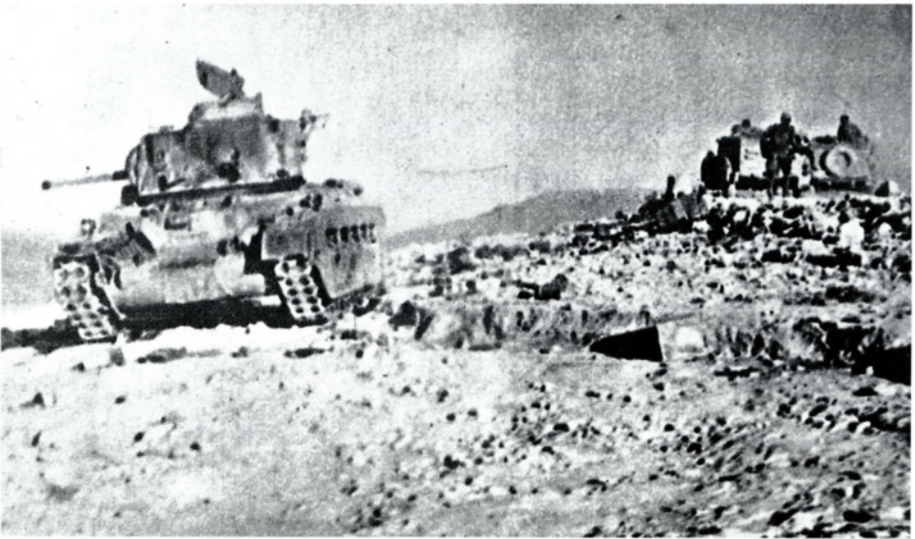
The British attack secured Halfaya Pass easily, for it was held by Italian troops, 500 of whom were captured, though not before their guns had knocked out seven Matilda tanks of 7RTR. Sollum, lightly held, was also taken by a tank attack but as the rest of 4RTR, with infantry support, approached Capuzzo, they were attacked on the flanks by Combat Group Knabe, who disabled seven Matildas by aiming at their tracks. 2RTR formed the left wing of the attack and intended to swing round behind Capuzzo and secure Sidi Azei to cut off the expected German retreat from the border. However, they encountered first a 5th Light motorised infantry column heading for Capuzzo, then 5th Panzer Regiment's tanks following up. With this force now outnumbering the British, whose tank losses had been large, Gott called off the offensive and withdrew through Halfaya Pass, which was left guarded by 3rd Battalion Coldstream Guards and the nine remaining 4RTR Matildas.

Halfaya Pass was strategically valuable, however, and as soon as the newly arrived tanks of 15th Panzer Division could be brought up to Cyrenaica, Rommel used them to increase his available tanks to produce his largest tank force yet. On 26 May he put in an assault that involved a 15th Panzer infantry battalion, with artillery support, attacking from the west; a battalion of 8th Panzer Regiment tanks moving south round the Halfaya Pass escarpment and attacking from the east (ie the British rear); and a 5th Panzer Regiment battalion attacking from the southeast. A company of the latter succeeded in overrunning and capturing a British 25pdr battery, by the not infrequently used ploy of ignoring orders. The company commander requested permission from the battalion commander to eliminate the 25pdrs, which were causing trouble. The battalion commander told him to hold back, but the company commander decided to attack anyway because the guns were such a threat to his tanks. Feldwebel Wilhelm Wendt, who led a charge into the 25pdrs with his PzKpfw IV, was awarded the Iron Cross, First Class, in this action.

With Halfaya Pass under threat from all sides, the Coldstream Guards and 4RTR's Matildas had no option but to make a fighting withdrawal, which they did with some losses, including six of the tanks. Halfaya Pass was once again in German hands.

Despite what amounted to valiant and considerate leadership during the hard fighting of April and May 1941, Rommel decided that Generalmajor Streich, the divisional commander, and Oberst Olrich, 5th Panzer Regiment commander, should be dismissed after the Halfaya Pass action. He also ordered the court martial of one of the panzer battalion commanders who had declined to attack Matilda tanks head on. Rommel undoubtedly wanted some 'new brooms' and he had clashed with both Streich and Olrich several times in

Below: German troops in the background approach a British Matilda tank knocked out by one of the 88s in the Halfaya Pass.



the past as previously noted. Streich's fellow officers considered he had been unfairly and meanly treated for he had a good reputation for leadership, bravery, tank handling, politeness and humanity, and Olrich was highly regarded, too. Both had demonstrated their qualities well during the Cyrenaica campaign despite the differences with Rommel along the way.

As Streich's replacement Rommel brought in Generalmajor Johann von Ravenstein (confirmed 23 July 1941), promoted from the command of one of the 5th Panzer Regiment battalions. Von Brauchitsch, the Army C-in-C, was disturbed by such high profile dismissals and suggested command problems be handled more coolly and discreetly. Rommel justified his decisions by saying that both Streich and Olrich had 'failed completely' several times and often criticised his orders.

Above: German radio intelligence gathering was good. Here is an early observation post of 3rd Reconnaissance Battalion up by the Cyrenaica border on 21 March 1941 waiting for the main elements of 5th Light Division to catch up. Note the radio mast erected from the eight-wheel *Funkwagen* (radio vehicle) Sd Kfz 232.

OPERATION 'BATTLEAXE'

Wavell's early May assessment of German strength and intentions in Cyrenaica encouraged Prime Minister Churchill to send much-needed tank reinforcements for the British Western Desert Force by means of a five-ship fast convoy through the Mediterranean to Alexandria. One ship was sunk en route, but the rest delivered 82 of the new Crusader cruiser tanks, 135 Matildas and—of more limited value—21 Vickers light tanks.

Lt-Gen Noel Beresford-Pierce took over command of Western Desert Force and was directed by Wavell to mount a new major offensive, Operation 'Battleaxe', on 15 June, with the objective of relieving Tobruk and pushing the Germans back to the west of it. The British assessed the DAK to have about 300 tanks available at that time, compared with 200 British tanks. Actually DAK had only about 200, not all fit for service, and only about half these were PzKpfw IIIs and IVs, the rest being light IIs and Is.

By this time DAK had been fully joined by 15th Panzer Division (commanded by Generalmajor Walter Neumann-Silkow) so that the 'Brevity' action had been the last where 5th Light had to bear the full brunt of action alone. From now on it would be truly operating as part of a corps command.

After the recapture of Halfaya Pass on 27 May, Rommel left 15th Panzer Division defending the Cyrenaica-Egypt border area, and pulled 5th Light back to join the siege of Tobruk, with some elements at Gambut further east. 15th Panzer had also arrived with the Pak 38 50mm anti-tank gun, which was a useful addition, and these were mostly deployed in positions between Hafid Ridge (south of Capuzzo) round to Halfaya. A key decision, however, was to deploy the Flak 18 88mm guns of 1st Battalion 33rd (Luftwaffe) Flak Regiment dug into well-protected sangars to guard Halfaya Pass. This was the first deliberate deployment by Rommel of the guns in the anti-tank role, though he had used them briefly in emergency in the 1940 Battle of Arras, and at least once in the Cyrenaica campaign a Flak 88 had been aimed at a tank. The Luftwaffe flak unit was attached to 5th Light. It was the 88s that struck the first decisive blow that wrecked the British hopes for 'Battleaxe'.

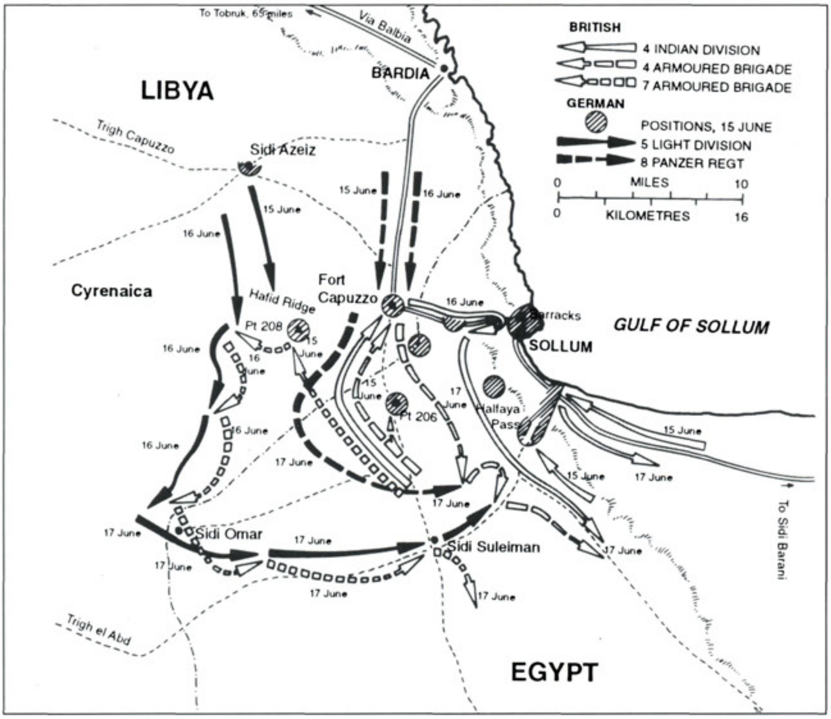
The British master plan was for the 4th Indian Division on the right flank (with 4th Armoured Brigade giving tank support) to take Halfaya Pass, while 7th Armoured Division (less 4th Armoured Brigade) approached inland above the coastal escarpment towards an area called Hafid Ridge, where 15th Panzer Division was expected to be. Meanwhile, in the centre, 22nd Guards Brigade was to advance and seize Capuzzo and Sollum, backed by 4th Armoured Brigade who would move on to them after the Halfaya Pass action. With all these objectives secured, 7th Armoured Division was to drive on the 80 miles to Tobruk, and they and Tobruk garrison forces would then force the DAK back on the Derna-Mechili line.

On paper this looked good, but British staff work often made wrong assumptions. In this case, understandably perhaps, the deployment and power of the 88mm guns was overlooked. The approach to the Halfaya Pass at dawn on 15 June was met by silence as though the defenders were unaware of the attack. But at 09.00hrs, when the British Matildas advanced, they were decimated by fire from the 88s sunk deep in their sangars. 'They are tearing my tanks to bits,' were the last words heard over the radio from the commander of C Squadron, 4RTR, which had put in the main attack All the Matildas were destroyed except one, and the follow-up infantry never went in. The towed 25pdr battery intended to have given fire support did not arrive as its vehicles got stuck in sand on the approach.

In the centre, 7RTR of 4th Armoured Brigade enjoyed more success. They did successfully take Capuzzo after some close-quarter fighting. It was quite lightly held and some of Rommel's decoy tanks were encountered.

On the left flank 7th Armoured Division, with some of the new Crusaders as well as the old A13s, made a slow late start, ran into well-concealed 50mm anti-tank guns at Hafid Ridge and suffered losses, but counter-attacked. Attacking a

Right: The British made good use of Portees—trucks carrying 2pdr anti-tank guns. The vehicles shown, however, are improvised Portees, being trucks carrying captured Italian 4.7cm anti-tank guns, here well emplaced in one of the defensive boxes much favoured by the British.


To Tobruk, 65 miles
Via Balbia
BARDIA
LIBYA
BRITISH
4 INDIAN DIVISION
4 ARMOURED BRIGADE
7 ARMOURED BRIGADE
GERMAN
POSITIONS, 15 JUNE
5 LIGHT DIVISION
8 PANZER REGT
0
MILES
10
0
KILOMETRES
16
Trigh Capuzzo
Sidi Azeiz
15 June
16 June
Cyrenaica
Fort Capuzzo
Hafid Ridge
Pt 208
Barracks
SOLLUM
GULF OF SOLLUM
Pt 206
Halfaya Pass
17 June
Sidi Omar
Sidi Suleiman
To Sidi Barani
Trigh el Abd
EGYPT

Left: Operation 'Battleaxe'—showing the British attack and the German response.

dummy German leaguer, they were ambushed by some 5th Light tanks and were then counter-attacked again in the evening by a larger 5th Light force before withdrawing back to the border wire to replenish and recover overnight. By now hardly any of the British objectives had been achieved, save for the taking of Capuzzo, and half the British tanks had already been destroyed—some by mines but most by 50mm Pak 38s or the formidable 88s at Halfaya, which could outrange and penetrate any British tank. Rommel had seen British intentions and gained time during the day to rush 5th Light down from Tobruk and Gambut.

Next day, 16 June, Rommel ordered Generalmajor Neumann-Silkow to counter-attack and retake Capuzzo, while von Ravenstein, in his first action as 5th Light commander, was to take his division in a bold swing south of Hafid Ridge to outflank the intended British armoured thrust westward, then circle behind it at Sidi Omar and head for Halfaya Pass to cut off its retreat. This resulted in running battles all day, as the armour of both sides clashed and swerved apart after hard fighting. The British tanks did mighty damage to an unprotected 5th Light supply column, which was virtually destroyed. The hardy Feldwebel Wendt added a Knight's Cross to his Iron Cross that day for spotting and directing fire on a moving British Portee anti-tank battery to prevent it coming into action. A lucky 2pdr shot penetrated his PzKpfw IV and badly wounded his driver and gunner, but did not destroy the tank. Meanwhile, 15th Panzer Division had a tougher time. They found that the British Matilda tanks defending Capuzzo had dug themselves in hull-down during the night and so were well protected. Thirty (out of 80) attacking German tanks were lost.

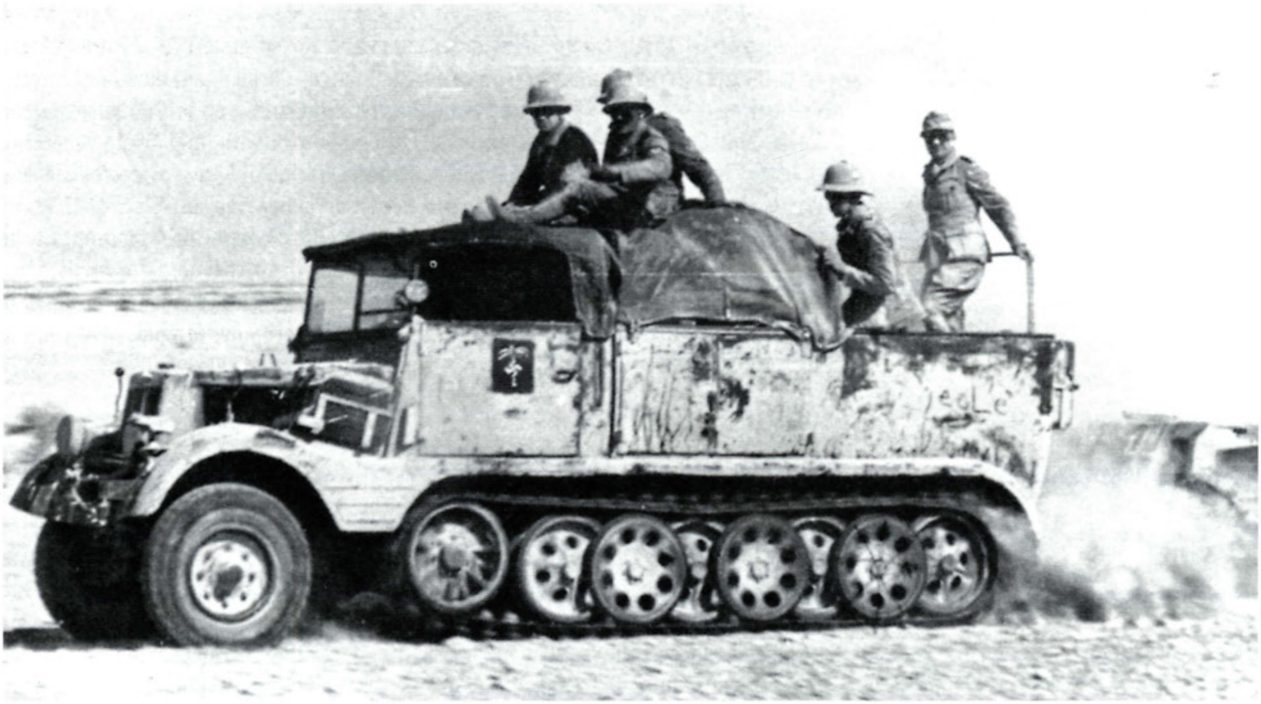
In view of this, on 17 June Rommel ordered just a token force of 8th Panzer Regiment to stay north of Capuzzo to prevent a breakout, while the balance of the regiment's tanks and other 15th Panzer Division units swept south to join 5th Light in outflanking 7th Armoured Division. The British, fearing a new attack on Capuzzo and being cut off as a result, withdrew from Capuzzo.

All the British units were in confusion and had lost more than half their tanks. DAK's astute radio monitors heard radio traffic calling the Western Desert Force commander, Beresford-Pierce, up to the front for consultation. Rommel interpreted this as meaning that British plans were in disarray, so called on 5th Light to run straight for Halfaya via Sidi Suleman to cut off the withdrawing British, while 15th Panzer Division swung parallel to them south of Hafid Ridge. A determined and stubborn fighting withdrawal and rearguard action by the surviving 15 Matilda tanks of 7RTR, plus bombing attacks by the RAF, slowed up the German advance and gave time for British forces to withdraw along the escarpment—virtually back to where they started. The British lost 80 percent of their tanks to all causes. The German losses were 62 tanks, but 50 of these were recovered and repaired from the battlefield.

This three-day battle was a triumph for Rommel and the DAK and a disaster for the British. Prime Minister Churchill decided a change of command was necessary to bring in new thinking. He appointed General Sir Claude Auchinleck as the new C-in-C Middle East, and sent Sir Archibald Wavell to take Auchinleck's place as C-in-C India.

Both sides made significant changes after 'Battleaxe'. The new British C-in-C took charge on 2 July and staved off Churchill's urgings for a new offensive that summer, calling instead for considerable reinforcements and time to prepare a very large winter offensive. He suggested his expanded forces should include two or three more armoured divisions. This resulted in the setting up of a new command, Eighth Army (effective September 26, but staffed well before that) commanded by General Sir Alan Cunningham. At the time he was a highly regarded national hero, having liberated Italian-occupied Somaliland and Abyssinia (Ethiopia) in spectacular style earlier in 1941. He was also a brother of Admiral Sir Andrew Cunningham, then the successful commander of the British Mediterranean Fleet, whose submarines were making life hard for the DAK by sinking so many of its supply ships. About 270,000 tons of supplies of all kinds were lost in submarine or air attacks through 1941, equivalent to about eight months of basic needs.

Right: A 10.5cm le FH 18 L/28 in action with 75th Artillery Regiment, probably at Mechili in April 1941.



Above: 75th Artillery Regiment Sd Kfz 11 showing sand camouflage roughly applied over the original field grey finish. Note DAK symbol on door.

Cunningham had under command XIII Corps (once Western Desert Force but now reorganised as an infantry corps) and the new XXX Corps, which comprised three armoured divisions or brigades. This segregation into specialised roles at corps level proved to be a basic flaw as tactical flexibility (which was the basis of German success) was severely restricted. In XIII Corps were 1st New Zealand Division, 4th Indian Division, 1st Guards Brigade and 1st Army Tank Brigade, newly arrived from England with one regiment of Valentines and two of Matildas. In XXX Corps were 7th Armoured Division, 4th Armoured Brigade Group, 22nd Guards (Motor) Brigade and 1st South African Division. In reserve was 2nd South African Division.

This huge increase in resources, though not fully up to Auchinleck's desired level, put a powerful British and Commonwealth force in the field with 175,000 men and 756 tanks. There were 259 tanks in reserve and another 96 still en route from Britain. In addition to these forces, 32nd Army Tank Brigade with Matildas was landed by sea at Tobruk in September, and the Australian forces there were withdrawn to Egypt and replaced by British, South African and Polish formations.

There were changes, too, on the German side. Rommel and his DAK were nominally answerable to the Italian C-in-C in Cyrenaica, General Gariboldi, whose staff actually gave Rommel a free hand. Back in Germany the Army Command (OKH) was still extremely nervous of Rommel and his activities. So General Halder had the idea of sending a senior staff officer, Generalmajor Alfred Gause, and a big team of staff officers to be attached to General Gariboldi and his Comando Supremo HQ. They arrived almost without warning on 11 June to be the official liaison team between OKH and the Italian C-in-C. The Italians regarded this as an insult and an intrusion, and Rommel could see it was clearly intended to clip his wings. He outsmarted OKH by putting up a much better, and ultimately very logical alternative, accepted by Army C-in-C von Brauchitsch, that the new Panzergruppe Afrika be formed (effective 31 July 1941) commanded by Rommel with Gause as his chief of staff and Gause's team as the Gruppe staff. In this new arrangement Panzergruppe Afrika would have under command the original DAK (5th Light and 15th Panzer), strengthened by a new German infantry division and the Italian Savona infantry division. The Italian forces would form XXI Italian Corps (with Trente, Brescia, Pavia and Bologna divisions) and XX Mobile Corps (with the Ariete Armoured Division and Trieste Motorised Division). General Gariboldi was replaced by General Bastico, who commanded the Italian forces and on paper was still the C-in-C.

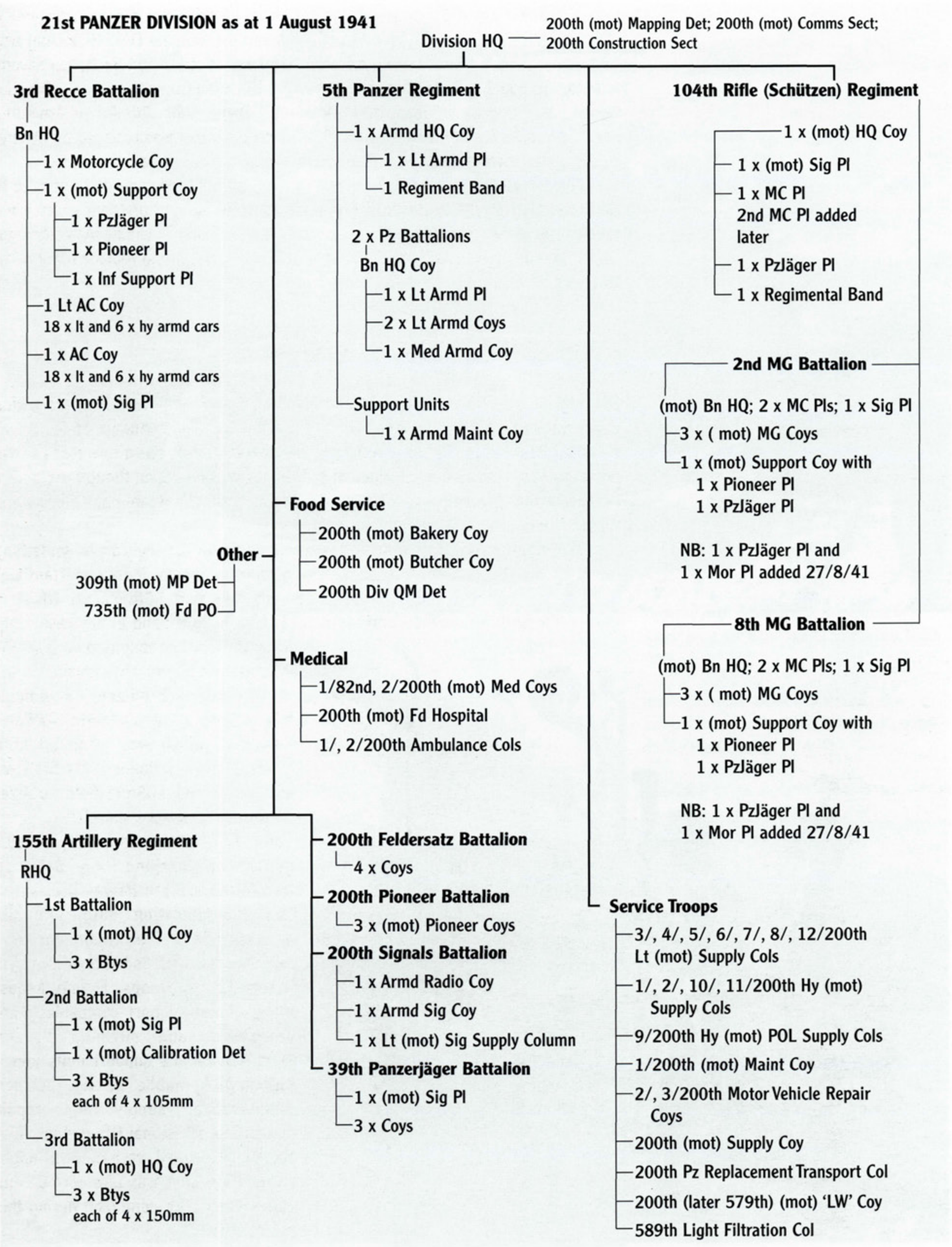
Effectively what this achieved was to give Rommel his head—the opposite to the original OKH intention. In the process it tidied up the problem of assorted Italian units which had previously only had a vague chain of command. Generalmajor Ludwig Crüwell then came out from Germany to replace Rommel as DAK commander.

5TH LIGHT TO 21ST PANZER

Panzergruppe Afrika was officially instituted on 31 July 1941, and a benefit in kind came the way of 5th Light, too, for on the following day, 1 August 1941, it was renamed 21st Panzer Division, reflecting the new DAK status as a true corps of two divisions and support troops. Much of the change was on paper, though there were new staff officers. The 1a was Major von Heuduck, the 1b Hauptmann Böhles and the 1c Oberleutnant Rickert.

Additional units came under command to enlarge the division to something closer to the theoretical establishment of a panzer division. Most important was 15th Motorcycle Battalion, which was transferred from 15th Panzer Division, though the unit had been operating under 5th Light command in any case, right from its arrival as vanguard unit of 15th Panzer. Also from 15th Panzer came 104th Rifle (Schützen) Regiment. Newly formed was 155th Artillery Regiment, which was made up from three existing battalions, the first two with motorised 105mm field howitzer batteries while the third had heavy batteries of 150mm and 100mm K18 guns. 2nd Machine Gun Battalion transferred to 15th Panzer Division on this reorganisation date, and the attached 33rd Flak Regiment who operated the key 88s left the division to become corps troops. During August many of the support companies were reorganised and 'streamlined', and extra service and support units joined including a mobile bakery, butcher, maintenance, supply and repair companies. Divisional HQ was set up at Bardia. As noted earlier, 90th Light (Africa) Division was also formed and came under DAK command during this period.

Below: Crew of a Model 34 8cm mortar in action from a sangar.



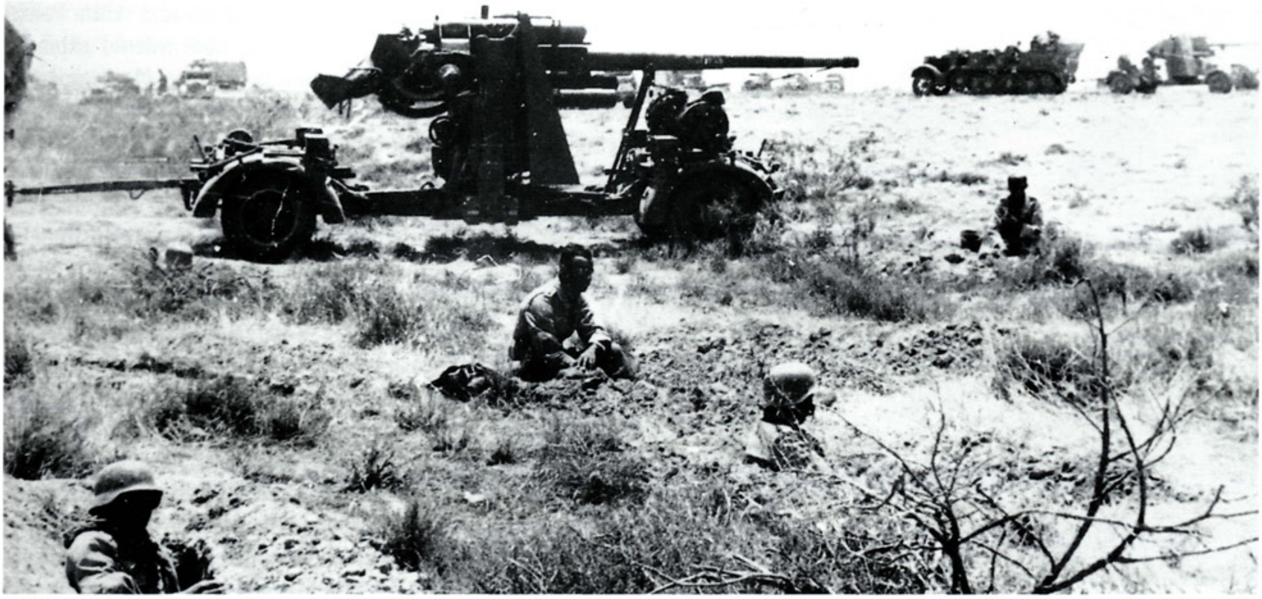
21st PANZER DIVISION as at 1 August 1941

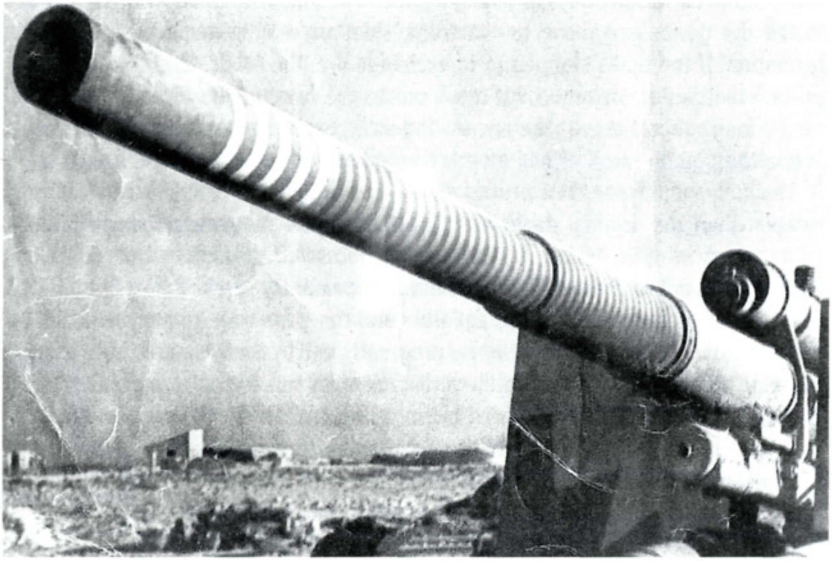
Division HQ — 200th (mot) Mapping Det; 200th (mot) Comms Sect; 200th Construction Sect

- **3rd Recce Battalion**
  - Bn HQ
    - 1 x Motorcycle Coy
    - 1 x (mot) Support Coy
      - 1 x PzJäger Pl
      - 1 x Pioneer Pl
      - 1 x Inf Support Pl
    - 1 Lt AC Coy
      18 x lt and 6 x hy armd cars
    - 1 x AC Coy
      18 x lt and 6 x hy armd cars
    - 1 x (mot) Sig Pl
- **5th Panzer Regiment**
  - 1 x Armd HQ Coy
    - 1 x Lt Armd Pl
    - 1 Regiment Band
  - 2 x Pz Battalions
    - Bn HQ Coy
      - 1 x Lt Armd Pl
      - 2 x Lt Armd Coys
      - 1 x Med Armd Coy
  - Support Units
    - 1 x Armd Maint Coy
- **104th Rifle (Schützen) Regiment**
  - 1 x (mot) HQ Coy
  - 1 x (mot) Sig Pl
  - 1 x MC Pl
    2nd MC Pl added later
  - 1 x PzJäger Pl
  - 1 x Regimental Band
  - **2nd MG Battalion**
    - (mot) Bn HQ; 2 x MC Pls; 1 x Sig Pl
      - 3 x (mot) MG Coys
      - 1 x (mot) Support Coy with
        1 x Pioneer Pl
        1 x PzJäger Pl

      NB: 1 x PzJäger Pl and
      1 x Mor Pl added 27/8/41
  - **8th MG Battalion**
    - (mot) Bn HQ; 2 x MC Pls; 1 x Sig Pl
      - 3 x (mot) MG Coys
      - 1 x (mot) Support Coy with
        1 x Pioneer Pl
        1 x PzJäger Pl

      NB: 1 x PzJäger Pl and
      1 x Mor Pl added 27/8/41
- **Food Service**
  - 200th (mot) Bakery Coy
  - 200th (mot) Butcher Coy
  - 200th Div QM Det
- **Other**
  - 309th (mot) MP Det
  - 735th (mot) Fd PO
- **Medical**
  - 1/82nd, 2/200th (mot) Med Coys
  - 200th (mot) Fd Hospital
  - 1/, 2/200th Ambulance Cols
- **155th Artillery Regiment**
  - RHQ
    - 1st Battalion
      - 1 x (mot) HQ Coy
      - 3 x Btys
    - 2nd Battalion
      - 1 x (mot) Sig Pl
      - 1 x (mot) Calibration Det
      - 3 x Btys
        each of 4 x 105mm
    - 3rd Battalion
      - 1 x (mot) HQ Coy
      - 3 x Btys
        each of 4 x 150mm
- **200th Feldersatz Battalion**
  - 4 x Coys
- **200th Pioneer Battalion**
  - 3 x (mot) Pioneer Coys
- **200th Signals Battalion**
  - 1 x Armd Radio Coy
  - 1 x Armd Sig Coy
  - 1 x Lt (mot) Sig Supply Column
- **39th Panzerjäger Battalion**
  - 1 x (mot) Sig Pl
  - 3 x Coys
- **Service Troops**
  - 3/, 4/, 5/, 6/, 7/, 8/, 12/200th Lt (mot) Supply Cols
  - 1/, 2/, 10/, 11/200th Hy (mot) Supply Cols
  - 9/200th Hy (mot) POL Supply Cols
  - 1/200th (mot) Maint Coy
  - 2/, 3/200th Motor Vehicle Repair Coys
  - 200th (mot) Supply Coy
  - 200th Pz Replacement Transport Col
  - 200th (later 579th) (mot) 'LW' Coy
  - 589th Light Filtration Col





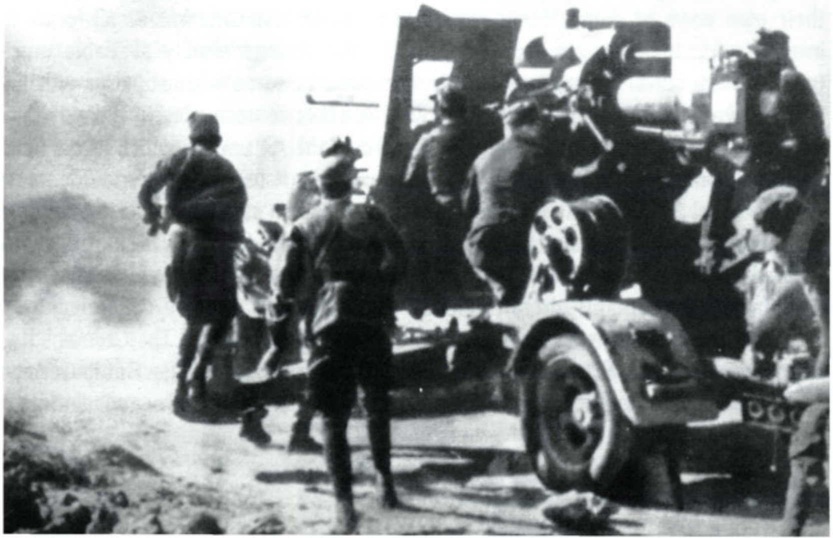
Opposite page, above: The most formidable German weapon in the desert fighting was the 88mm Flak 36, which became much more famous in the anti-tank role. Here is the gun on the move with its halftrack tractor.

Opposite page, below: A Flak 36 emplaced in a sangar going into action against approaching British tanks.

Above: The 88 was highly mobile thanks to its halftrack tractor, and could be moved quickly across the battlefield.

Left: One of the 88s emplaced at Halfaya Pass, with a ring painted on the barrel for every enemy tank destroyed.

Below left: The 88 was at its most effective when fired direct from its wheeled chassis, a technique developed by 21st Panzer Division in the desert fighting.



During the summer months Rommel moved both 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions to the area between Tobruk and the frontier, and ordered extensive exercises to perfect tank attack, support and anti-tank techniques. Most important of these was the idea of firing the 88 direct from its cruciform towing platform without stopping to emplace it. At Halfaya and other defence points, the 88s had been emplaced conventionally, on the ground and off their mobile towing trolleys, though well concealed in sangars. One battery had remained with the tank battalions, however, for possible deployment elsewhere. But in the famous running fire fight with 7th Armoured Division in the Sidi Omar area on 16 June, these mobile 88s had been fired straight from their wheeled towing trailers without being conventionally emplaced. This was done as an extemporised act in the heat of battle, simply because there just wasn't time to emplace the gun first in a running fight. The idea worked, however, and now it became the normal operational technique for using the 88 in the anti-tank role. It gave immense extra fire power and flexibility to the armoured units, particularly at the time when the most powerful tank-mounted gun with DAK was the 50mm in the PzKpfw III.

With its ability to fire straight from its trailer safely proven, the 88 batteries could now move mixed in among the tanks, a facility made possible by the reliable Sd Kfz 7 semi-track tractor, which also carried the crew and ammunition. The exercises tried various ways of deploying the towed 88 with tanks. They could travel inside the group and move to the front, sides or rear as required of a moving formation. If the tanks stopped to to exchange fire, the 88s could be moved out to protect the flanks, or they could move out to the front of the formation take well aimed long range shots at the enemy and swiftly retire again into the heart of the formation.

Skilfully deployed, they proved to have even greater value as an anti-tank weapon than the original deployment at Halfaya had suggested. The previous use of a battery of 88s in the field at the unsuccessful attempt to take Tobruk on 14 April was not in the anti-tank role but in the infantry support role, firing HE 'air bursts' though the results were negligible and the guns were too exposed and not mobile. Now Rommel and all the fighting units of DAK fully appreciated the true value of the 88 as a highly mobile anti-tank weapon of great power, and the 88 became legendary, intensely feared by opposing tankmen.

This flexibility of thought and imaginative and co-operative use of arms was a key factor of the German success in the desert war, and seems to have more than made up for total German lack of desert war experience before 1941. The British may have had a long tradition of service under desert conditions, but they had a much more compartmentalised style of thought. Infantry, tanks and artillery all had their own ways of doing things, and there was little inclination at all levels to integrate and co-operate. For example, the British had readily available much greater numbers of a gun that was similar—and in some ways superior—to the 88. This was the famous 3.7-inch AA gun. It could have been used in the anti-tank role just like the 88, but it was strictly limited to the AA use for which it had been designed. Only on a few unauthorised occasions was it used by the British against enemy tanks. Such was the orthodox thinking at British staff level that it was some months after the 'Battleaxe' debacle that the part played by the German 88s was appreciated. The British staff just hadn't seen that AA guns could be used for anything other than anti-aircraft defence.

Much the same was true when it came to armoured warfare. The Germans had fewer tanks than the British, and many were small PzKpfw Is and IIs. But in German armoured units there was no distinction between 'cruiser' tanks and dedicated

Below: Because of equipment shortages, the Afrika Korps had to be resourceful in repair and maintenance work. Here the engine is removed from an armoured car using a portable gantry.

Above: A badly damaged Volkswagen Kfz 1 Kübelwagen is stripped down completely for rebuilding by DAK vehicle engineers.

'infantry' tanks, both of which existed in the British Army, each having different speed limitations. Artillery units were also handled differently. When they were available, artillery units were deployed in fully integrated measure by panzer units, but this was not always the case with British tank formations where artillery was often kept at arm's length.

The myth grew that German tanks were superior to British tanks in armour and firepower. In fact, the differences were not all that great, at least in 1941. The British 2pdr gun was, in fact, marginally superior to the equivalent German 37mm gun. The early versions of the PzKpfw III and IV were not as well armoured as they needed to be, though they were superior in reliability and build quality. But the Matilda tank, slow as it was, was actually feared by the DAK in 1941, for it was too well armoured for their tank guns to penetrate it. It took an 88 to smash a Matilda.

Formation of Panzergruppe Afrika brought in the need for even more supplies to keep the bigger force going. As before, there were big losses in transit. Early in 1941 30,000 tons a month was the bare minimum just to keep going, but in July-October 1941, 72,000 tons, the average monthly arrival, was inadequate and in some subsequent months it was much lower than this.

Careful husbandry was the order of the day, and fullest use was made of all kinds of captured British stores, fuel and equipment, including lorries, tanks, guns and armoured cars. A well-stocked maintenance base was set up at Gambut in the summer of 1941, and here equipment was repaired, rebuilt, cannibalised and even fabricated. Wrecked tanks were carefully recovered from the battlefield, and by using all these ploys the limited arrival of new tanks and vehicles could be boosted. During that summer, these methods increased the tanks available to 15th and 21st Panzer Division up to around 250 each, with some limited reserve stock as well.

It is also worth noting that, in spite the value of the 88 in summer 1941, new arrivals of these weapons boosted the DAK numbers to only 35. Of these 12 were kept in mobile batteries to operate with the panzer divisions, the other 35 going to Halfaya and other frontier defence areas.

After all this training and preparation the first operation of 21st Panzer Division under von Ravenstein's command proved to be a near disaster. Rommel was planning a decisive assault on Tobruk for the autumn, but got wind of a British build up of forces near the frontier, suggesting than another big offensive was planned. His air reconnaissance showed signs of a big supply dump being built up 15 miles inside the frontier to support a large attacking force. In fact he was being duped by the British—the supply dump was a dummy, even though a real one was built at the same spot later. Rommel ordered 21st Panzer Division to mount a 'reconnaissance in force' to investigate the dump and attack any British forces found in the area. So, on 14 September, the division, accompanied by Rommel in his *Mammut*, swept round Sidi Omar and drove east across the border into Egypt. The border area was guarded by 7th Armoured Division Support Group who, acting

Official tank strength at 18 November 1941

PzKpfw II	35
PzKpfw III	58
PzKpfw IV	17
Total	110

under orders, withdrew keeping just ahead of 21st Panzer's tanks and out of range. Eventually, 21st Panzer ran out of fuel near Sofafi, but not before discovering the dump to be a dummy and capturing a South African mobile office truck containing operational orders concerned with withdrawal and making no mention of any offensive plans. This, too, was a dupe which convinced Rommel that there was no immediate threat to his build up for the attack on Tobruk.

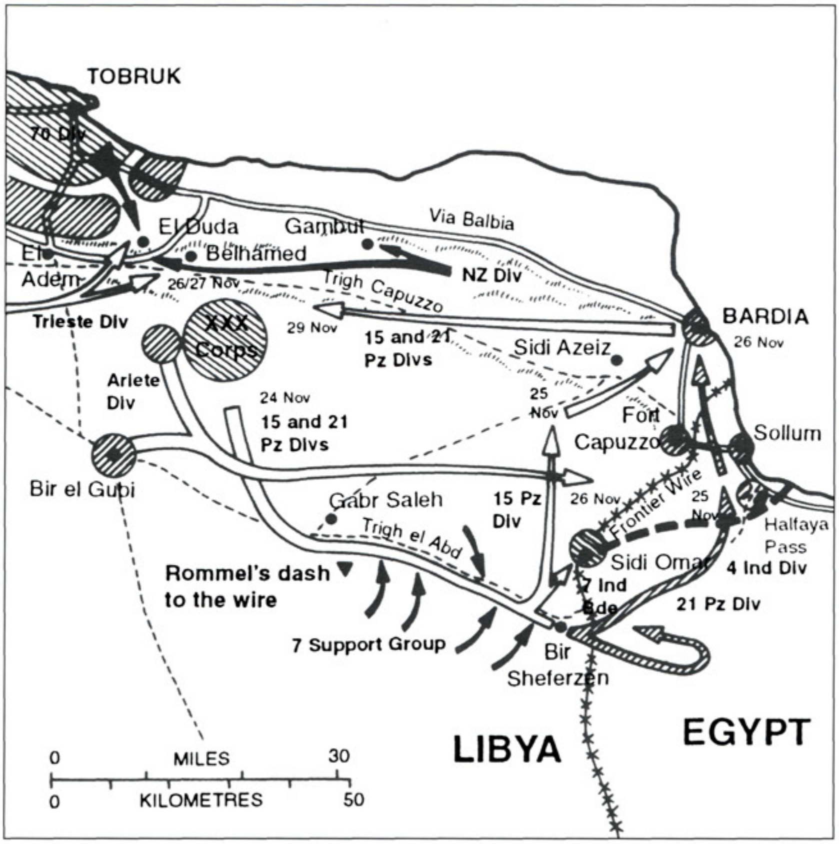
However, while 21st Panzer was still halted at Sofafi waiting for the supply column to arrive with fuel, they were heavily bombed by large RAF bomber forces, causing losses and a lot of discomfort. As soon as the fuel arrived, Rommel ordered a quick withdrawal, but even he almost got left behind because of a punctured tyre.

OPERATION 'CRUSADER'

British planning for an autumn offensive by the new Eighth Army had been extensive and ambitious, with the plans calling for a much grander version of 'Battleaxe' and with similar intentions—to relieve Tobruk and drive the enemy out of Cyrenaica. It would be on a big scale, using the greatly increased forces now available. Planned for 18 November, it would use XXX Corps to cross the frontier about 40 miles south of the most southerly German outpost at Sidi Omar. XXX Corps would strike northwest for Tobruk, engaging DAK armour which was positioned south and east of it. A force from Tobruk would break out to meet it. Meanwhile, XIII Corps was to engage the frontier defence line, mostly held by Italian divisions by then, outflank it and roll up behind it. Backing up XIII Corps was to be 4th Armoured Brigade now equipped with the fast (35mph top speed) M5 light tank—the Stuart or Honey—from America. 4th Armoured Brigade was to protect XIII Corps against counter-attack from the nearest German panzer division, the 21st, which was based east and west of Gambut at the time. It was hoped 4th Armoured Brigade would draw off 21st Panzer in the direction of XXX Corps' armour.

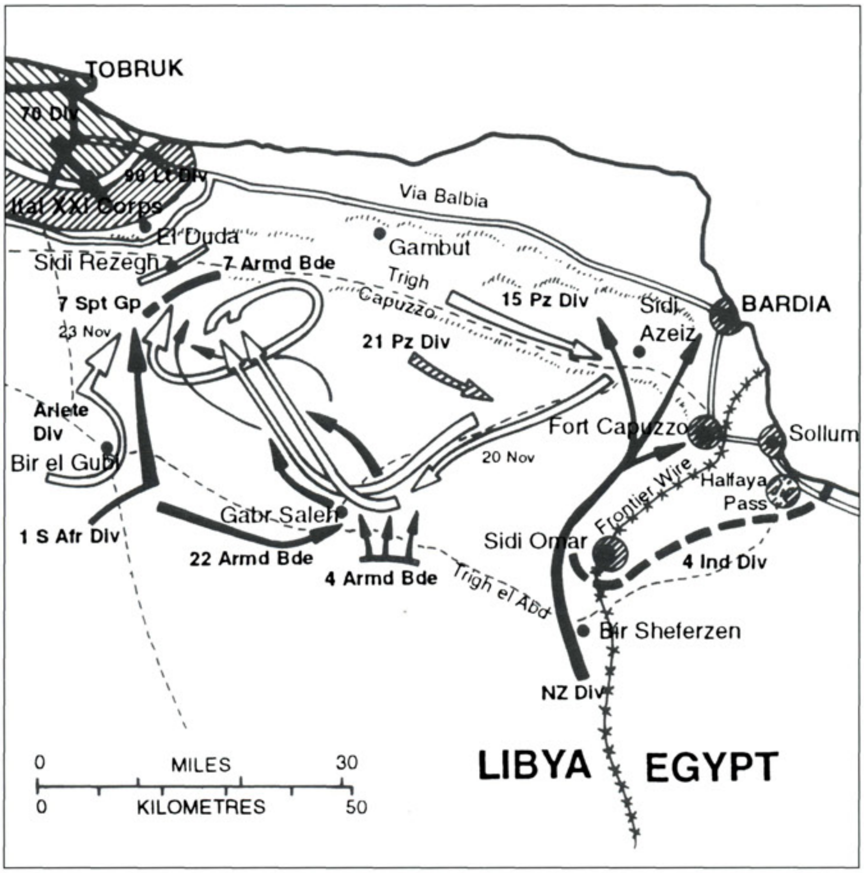
At the time 'Crusader' started, the British armoured units had the massive total of 724 tanks available, 201 of them infantry tanks, the rest cruisers. Additionally, there were some light tanks and armoured cars. By contrast DAK had only 174 effective comparable tanks (PzKpfw IIIs and IVs) since the rest were all PzKpfw I and II lights. The Italian divisions had 146 M13 tanks but by then these were even more of a liability than they had been before. If the Germans had an advantage at all, it was in the availability of 12 88s, in spite of the paucity of their numbers;

Below: Operation 'Crusader'—the attempt to break the siege of Tobruk.


TOBRUK
70 Div
El Duda
Gambut
Via Balbia
El Adem
Belhamed
26/27 Nov
Trigh Capuzzo
NZ Div
Trieste Div
XXX Corps
29 Nov
15 and 21 Pz Divs
Sidi Azeiz
BARDIA
26 Nov
Ariete Div
24 Nov
15 and 21 Pz Divs
25 Nov
Fort Capuzzo
Sollum
Bir el Gubi
Gabr Saleh
15 Pz Div
26 Nov
Frontier Wire
25 Nov
Halfaya Pass
Trigh el Abd
Rommel's dash to the wire
Sidi Omar
4 Ind Div
7 Ind Bde
21 Pz Div
7 Support Group
Bir Sheferzen
LIBYA
EGYPT
0 MILES 30
0 KILOMETRES 50

they were backed up by 96 towed Pak 38 50mm anti-tank guns.

November 1941 was a bad month for the German forces in North Africa. Rommel's plans to retake Tobruk were negated when a resupply convoy from Sicily was completely wiped out on 9 November: nothing got through. In mid-November Rommel flew to Rome, partly to spend a brief leave with his family but also to meet Mussolini and Italian military leaders. Better ways of protecting convoys to Libya was high on the agenda. The assault on Tobruk was rescheduled for 20 November, and then put back to 3 December. A deciding factor was the exceptionally bad weather, a period of rain storms and floods which set in on 16 November along the coast and over the Gebel Akhbar area This prevented air reconnaissance so no British movements could be detected, and the British also kept strict radio silence.

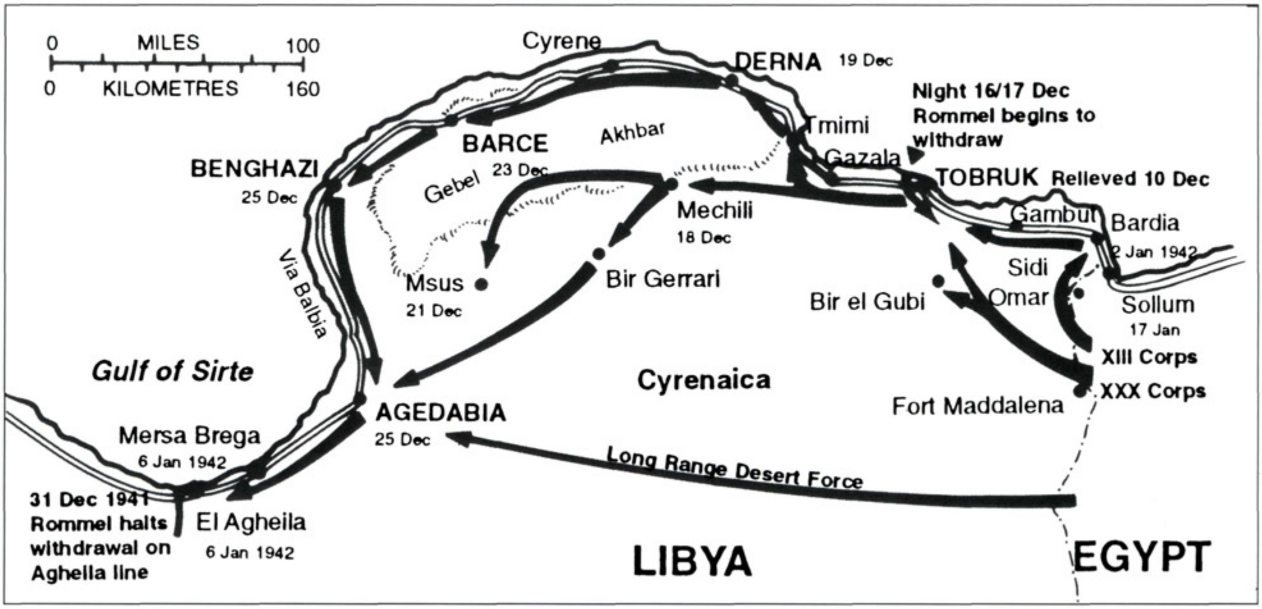

TOBRUK
70 Div
90 Lt Div
Ital XXI Corps
Via Balbia
El Duda
Gambut
Sidi Rezegh
7 Armd Bde
Trigh Capuzzo
7 Spt Gp
23 Nov
15 Pz Div
Sidi Azeiz
BARDIA
21 Pz Div
Ariete Div
Bir el Gubi
Fort Capuzzo
Sollum
20 Nov
Halfaya Pass
Frontier Wire
Gabr Saleh
1 S Afr Div
22 Armd Bde
4 Armd Bde
Sidi Omar
4 Ind Div
Trigh el Abd
Bir Sheferzen
NZ Div
0
MILES
30
0
KILOMETRES
50
LIBYA
EGYPT

Above: Operation 'Crusader'—Rommel counter-attacks, but he would be forced to pull back his troops to El Agheila by the end of 1941.

Rommel arrived back from Rome on 17 November and got on with detailed planning for the taking of Tobruk, which included an attack by 21st Panzer from its eastern base near Gambut. Rommel had also sited his HQ there. Because of Ultra intercepts Eighth Army knew of Rommel's intentions and the positions of key formations. So Operation 'Crusader' was brought forward to 18 November, when at dawn, deep in the desert, the armour of XXX Corps moved in the direction of Tobruk. It was spread over a broad front of over 20 miles and 7th Armoured Division alone was spread over an area of 100 square miles. The 7th Armoured Division armoured cars were in the van of this big formation, acting as a reconnaissance force.

None of this was spotted or expected by the Germans. When first seen by an armoured car patrol of 15th Panzer west of Sidi Omar at about 10.30hrs, the forward British units were reported to Rommel as a 'reconnaissance in force' and he was still noting it as that two days later on 20 November after considerable fighting had already taken place. The XXX Corps' columns pressed on, still unchallenged. However, as they crossed the area west of Sidi Omar, they started to slow up as they ran into the nasty rain and mud of the coastal area weather system.

Against 'Crusader', it was 3rd Recce Battalion of 21st Panzer who were first in action. The Stuarts of 4th Armoured Brigade, which had covered the southern flank of XIII Corps, pulled into their leaguer between Sidi Omar and Gabr Saleh at 17.00hrs, and in the dusk clashed with an armoured car patrol of 3rd Recce. Some of the Stuarts pursued the patrol towards Derna, and the armoured cars reported '200 tanks attacking'. When von Ravenstein first heard the morning report of tanks being spotted by 3rd Recce Battalion, he sent a tank company and artillery battery south to back up the armoured cars, and when he received the 3rd Recce


0 MILES 100
0 KILOMETRES 160
Cyrene
DERNA 19 Dec
Night 16/17 Dec Rommel begins to withdraw
Tmimi
Gazala
TOBRUK Relieved 10 Dec
BARCE 23 Dec
Akhbar
Gebel
BENGHAZI 25 Dec
Mechili 18 Dec
Gambut
Bardia 2 Jan 1942
Msus 21 Dec
Bir Gerrari
Sidi Omar
Bir el Gubi
Sollum 17 Jan
Via Balbia
XIII Corps
XXX Corps
Gulf of Sirte
Cyrenaica
Fort Maddalena
AGEDABIA 25 Dec
Mersa Brega 6 Jan 1942
Long Range Desert Force
31 Dec 1941 Rommel halts withdrawal on Aghelia line
El Agheila 6 Jan 1942
LIBYA
EGYPT

Above: The aftermath of Operation 'Crusader'—Rommel is forced to withdraw.

Battalion's signal in the evening he planned to send 5th Panzer Regiment south overnight to attack the 4th Armoured Brigade Stuarts at Gabr Saleh.

However, Rommel countermanded this order and still maintained there was no threat. He thought it a feint or, at best, a diversion to dissuade him from attacking Tobruk. Even detailed movement information gleaned from XIII Corps prisoners taken at the border by the Italians failed to convince him. Hence, there were no German counter-attacks on 19 November, but there were limited British forays in the west including the capture of Sidi Rezegh airfield and the movement of 7th Armoured Brigade up to Sidi Rezegh, just south of Tobruk.

General Crüwell interpreted the attack on 3rd Recce, and a second clash with them, as an indication of the British line of attack. He ordered von Ravenstein to form a special force—5th Panzer Regiment with 12 105mm howitzers and four of the 88s—to move south from Gambut to Gabr Saleh and attack 4th Armoured Brigade there. This force was called Battle Group Stephan after its commander. Rommel watched the group depart that afternoon.

Chasing 3rd Recce's armoured cars and carrying out recce sweeps themselves had split up the 4th Armoured Brigade units. Battle Group Stephan encountered 8th Hussars late in the afternoon northeast of Gabr Saleh. In the vicious fire fight that followed, 20 Stuarts were knocked out, many by 88s using the new tactic of firing from their carriages. 5RTR was called up to aid the Hussars and lost another three Stuarts—though 12 of the knocked out tanks were later recovered. Battle Group Stephan lost only three tanks, with four more damaged but recoverable. The two sides withdrew for the night, but Battle Group Stephan, who had planned to move to Sidi Omar, was now stuck awaiting fuel from its supply column.

Crüwell assumed that 4th Armoured Brigade was the main British force and moved 15th Panzer and the rest of 21st Panzer south to attack. At dawn on 20 November the elements of 4th Armoured Brigade continued to engage Battle Group Stephan in what became a running fight. Eight more Stuarts were knocked out and four German tanks, two of them PzKpfw IIs. After two hours Battle Group Stephan moved off to the northwest to rendezvous with the rest of the division, now advancing southwards. The British thought they were withdrawing, beaten. By now 21st Panzer needed to refuel, so the rest of the day's fighting was done by 15th Panzer alone, leading to more heavy tank losses for 4th Armoured Brigade.

By now Rommel had belatedly realised the full British intention and ordered the DAK to move west at dawn to strike at 7th Armoured Brigade and other units drawn up at Sidi Rezegh. 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions did this so successfully in the dark, that when dawn broke 4th Armoured Brigade (and 22nd who had by now arrived in support) were surprised to find them gone, with the last units just disappearing west. A limited pursuit was called off and not resumed until that afternoon, when it then ran into rain and deep mud which slowed progress.

By the time 4th and 22nd Armoured Brigades arrived at Sidi Rezegh at dusk on 21 November, it was too late to help 7th Armoured Brigade which had been all but wiped out that morning. The day had started with 7th Armoured being ordered to move north to meet the Tobruk breakout force at El Duda. The British assumed that the apparent withdrawal of Battle Group Stephan the previous day meant the end of the German threat. However, just before the attack was about to begin, two big German tank groups were seen coming in on the right flank. These were 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions in full cry. 7th Armoured Brigade was, therefore, forced to split its resources; 7th Hussars and 2RTR moved east to meet and hold the approaching Germans while 6RTR alone led the charge for Tobruk. This was a fatal move. 6RTR lost 39 tanks in a futile charge. To the east, 7th Hussars were virtually wiped out by 21st Panzer in a brutal running fight marked by the bold use of 88mm and 50mm anti-tank guns often shielded behind lorries, and with the 88s firing on the move. By the end of the day, only 12 7th Hussars tanks, some damaged, were left running. Meanwhile, 16 tanks of 21st Panzer attacked 7th Armoured's Support Group, but here, in a static fight near Sidi Rezegh airfield, they had less success for they met their old bogey, 25pdrs firing over open sights. Manned by 60th Field Regiment, RA the 25pdrs succeeded in holding 21st Panzer off.

Above: Motorcycle troops performed admirably in the reconnaissance role for the Afrika Korps. This photograph shows the 8th Machine Gun Battalion arriving in Tripoli. Note tactical numbers on sidecars.

The Germans called for a Stuka attack on the guns, but this failed due to inaccurate bombing. A counter-attack made by five support and HQ company Crusaders was unsuccessful as all were hit. Further fire by the 25 pdrs held off the 21st Panzers tanks, but ammunition was running low on both sides. As the German tanks closed in, 22nd Armoured Brigade arrived from Gabr Saleh and the Germans withdrew. 2RTR was engaged by 15th Panzer Division and met a similar fate to the 7th Hussars, making it a black day indeed for 7th Armoured Brigade. While all this was going on, Rommel himself had got together a scratch force of reserves from Gambut and used them to repulse the British breakout from Tobruk.

At this stage in the operations, XXX Corps had taken such a pasting in its attempt to relieve Tobruk and bring DAK's tanks into a set-piece battle that a more prudent commander might have been inclined to call it a day and withdraw gracefully. Unfortunately, the Eighth Army commander did not have the full story. He had received optimistic reports of many German tanks destroyed and enemy movements westwards, but the full story of high British losses was still unknown thanks to scattered units and poor communications. The failure to link up with the Tobruk Garrison displeased him, and he suggested bringing up the 1st South African Division from Bir Gubi to help in another attempt on the morrow.

DAK's leaders decided to move away and reposition overnight. Crüwell wanted to move 21st Panzer and 15th Panzer back near their base at Gambut where their supplies were, but Rommel had now seen what was going on and had other ideas. He ordered them to form a defence line facing south along the escarpment from El Duda to Belhamed, so putting themselves between Tobruk and the British. Crüwell modified this idea by placing only 21st Panzer there, and positioning 15th Panzer to the east of the British and south of Gambut. On 22 November the tail end of these movements was spotted by the British tanks and a few even exchanged fire as the Germans pulled away. The movements were interpreted by the British as a withdrawal, so the British tanks remained in the Sidi Rezegh area, mostly near the airport. They included 22nd Armoured Division, who had come late on the scene and had so far avoided major engagements. The chance was too good to miss. Rommel told von Ravenstein to attack 7th Armoured Support Group and other units at the airport that afternoon.

So, on the afternoon of 21 November, 21st Panzer's 155th Rifle Regiment put in a brisk infantry attack from the north, engaging the British infantry protecting the airport. Fire support came from Artillery Group Böttcher, an army artillery force Rommel had assembled to bombard Tobruk. Meanwhile, one tank battalion of 5th Panzer Regiment swept around Sidi Rezegh and charged the airport from the west. In the vigorous defence of the airfield that followed, 7th Armoured Support Group's commander, Brigadier Jock Campbell, won the VC. Tanks of 22nd Armoured Brigade tried counter-attacks but were ineffective in the smoke and confusion. Some of them fired at the approaching tanks of 4th Armoured Brigade by mistake as they, too, came in to counter-attack. Von Ravenstein's tanks were, of course, ably supported by his anti-tank guns in their flexible role. In the smoke, dust and carnage, the British units had little option but to withdraw, and they retreated south of the airfield over a protecting ridge. As dusk fell, however, 15th Panzer

Right: A 15.5cm K419(f) in action bombarding Tobruk as part of Artillery Group Böttcher. This was a captured French type highly regarded by the Germans.

Left: A battery of 15cm K408(i) guns in action against Tobruk, again with Artillery Group Böttcher. These were Italian guns also used by DAK.

arrived from the northeast and caused extra chaos. By the end of the action 22nd Armoured Brigade was down to 34 running tanks and 7th Armoured only had 15. German tank losses were very few. As a bonus, 15th Panzer also captured the HQ and staff of 4th Armoured Brigade in the night attack, but this was more than offset by the capture, on the 23rd, of the DAK's entire communication centre and staff (and valuable cyphers) from their base near Gambut as 6th New Zealand Division moved in from the XIII Corps front.

That day, 23 November, was a Sunday—*Totensonntag* (Remembrance Sunday) in the German calendar. It proved to be an apt name for it saw huge carnage and losses inflicted on both sides. Rommel ordered that the remaining 7th Armoured Division forces south of Sidi Rezegh be crushed by encirclement. Crüwell did this by charging 15th Panzer Division, plus 21st's 5th Panzer Regiment, down from the north, sweeping west, and joining up with the Italian Ariete Division coming up from the southwest.

British tanks and trucks were dotted everywhere and the shooting was wild on both sides. Crüwell did not have Rommel's instinct for wise commitment. He lined up his tanks, the Ariete Division and 15th Rifle Regiment in trucks and charged them northwards through the British forces. It was spectacular but wasteful, for it gave unnecessary exposure to his tanks. German casualties and losses were heavy, including 72 tanks out of the 162 that attacked. The British were decimated, too, but at heavy cost to the DAK. Rommel now took charge and decided to capitalise on the destruction and disarray of the British by making a dash to the border in a diversionary but spectacular sweep, with his command car leading 21st Panzer and 15th Panzer following along behind. The column at one time was 40 miles long. Back in the border area at the time things were quiet. Cunningham and his corps commanders were having a conference near the border and staff cars and trucks were parked everywhere. Suddenly, out of the blue, they found Rommel and his tanks bearing down on them and everyone scattered and ran east for Egypt, including the generals in what was later jokingly called the 'Matruh Stakes'!

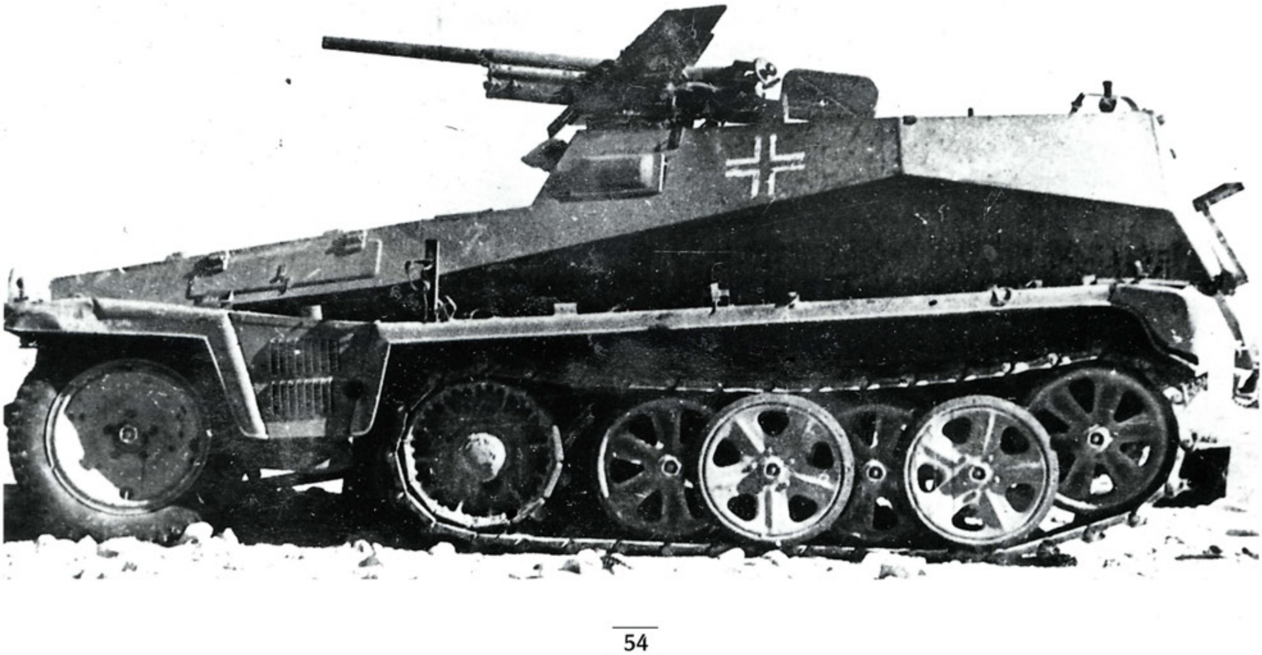
However, the DAK was too depleted for Rommel's sweep to do much damage, but it had a good psychological effect. In military terms it was questionable—spectacle for spectacle's sake. It was in the skirmish actions of this sweep (24–27

November) that the DAK finally found a way of tackling the 25pdrs that had given so much trouble by firing over open sights. They found the best technique was to give the batteries a plastering of HE from the short 75mm guns of the PzKpfw IV platoons, if necessary doing it over and over again until the crews were killed or cowed. Then the tanks would go in, aiming to crush the gun trails under their tracks.

The 'Crusader' offensive had been so clumsily handled that Auchinleck, the British C-in-C, was persuaded Cunningham was too demoralised to continue. He replaced him, therefore, with his own chief of staff, Maj-Gen Sir Neil Ritchie. The Sidi Rezegh battles had also exhausted and depleted the German side. Rommel's divisions on their border sweep had only shaky communications with Panzergruppe HQ due to the loss of the DAK signal centre. Faulty communications led to mistakes. Tobruk was now close to being relieved by the New Zealanders under General Bernard Freyberg coming up from the XIII Corps' front. In Rommel's absence, part of the Tobruk garrison managed a breakout. Elements of 21st Panzer on the border got the message and headed back to Tobruk. Rommel only got the message later and brought the rest of 21st Panzer, plus 15th Panzer, back with him. A further might battle, known as 2nd Sidi Rezegh, took place, yet again around the battered airfield area. This stretched over two days, 27–29 November, and was bloody indeed. The DAK tanks plus Ariete Division surrounded and pummelled the New Zealanders and the fighting was fierce.

During this, 21st Panzer suffered a setback on 29 November when von Ravenstein, en route for a meeting with Crüwell, lost his way and his car ran into an outpost of 25th NZ Battalion where he was captured. The wily British treated him well. He had lunch with Auchinleck's Director of Military Intelligence (during which his tent was 'bugged') and from all that he said it was deduced how hard pressed the DAK was, how bad communications were and how difficult Rommel could be to work for! Oberstleutnant G. G. Knabe took temporary command of 21st Panzer after von Ravenstein's capture, until Rommel appointed Generalleutnant Karl Böttcher commander the next day, switching him from command of the army artillery group. The British armoured brigades had had time to recover and had also

Below: The Sd Kfz 250/10 carried a 3.7cm Pak 36 gun and was issued to some motorised infantry company or platoon leaders to give fire support during an attack.



Above: A VW Kfz 1 Kübelwagen of a motorised infantry battalion on a scouting mission near Gazala in the summer of 1942.

received some new tanks. They attacked the DAK from the south on 30 November but not in a co-ordinated or effective way.

For the rest of 2nd Sidi Rezegh 21st Panzer was engaged from the east while 15th Panzer was sent by Rommel in a classic encircling punch that virtually crushed the brave New Zealanders and restored the Tobruk siege. But it was a Pyrrhic victory for Rommel. There was a lull in the fighting on 1 December and Panzergruppe Afrika sat tight to see what the British would do. Probing attacks to the border area on 3 December found they were still there. In fact, under Ritchie Eighth Army had found a new optimism, and more reinforcements were coming up from Egypt. Rommel realised that the Eighth Army was capable of mounting more attacks and so, on 4 December, he decided to cut his losses, abandon Tobruk and pull his forces back to El Adem. Eighth Army moved up only to find the Germans still withdrawing as Rommel now took his tanks back to the Gazala line. By 11 December all of Panzergruppe Afrika was back at Gazala, save stragglers and some isolated posts at Bardia and the frontier, and was now down to only 40 operational tanks.

Operation 'Crusader' had unexpectedly achieved its objective of driving the enemy out of Cyrenaica. The German defensive line, the Gazala Line, was shaky because it could be easily outflanked. This Eighth Army tried to do, but ineffectively, and weak attempts were repulsed by 15th Panzer. Gazala was clearly too vulnerable, however, so on 16 December Rommel pulled all his forces back to

Mersa Brega and El Agheila, which was an area easier to defend and nearer to his supply lines—and the original starting point back in February.

On 19 December, as the Germans pulled out, a convoy arrived at Benghazi with much needed new tanks. With these 15th Panzer clashed with 22nd Armoured Brigade at El Agheila in two sharp engagements on 28 and 30 December, destroying 60 British tanks in two battles and showing that even in retreat DAK still had very sharp teeth.

1942—YEAR OF THE CAULDRON

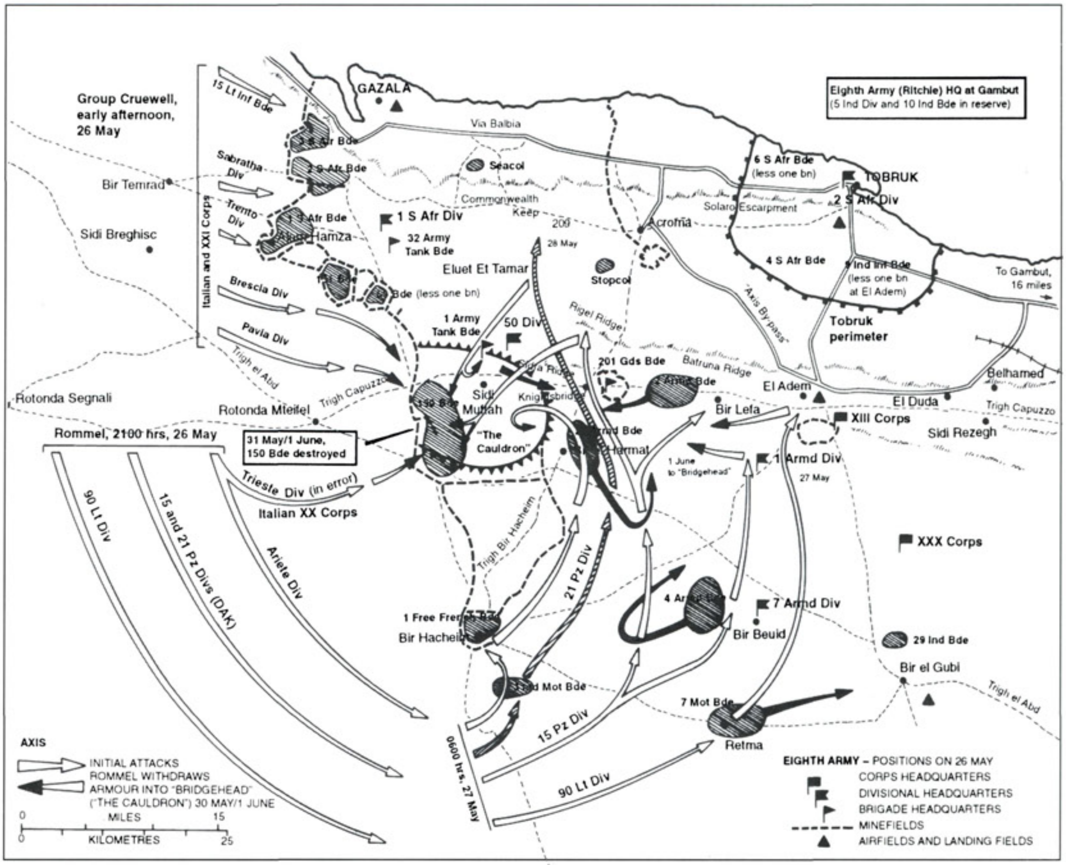
In the early months of 1942, the German supply situation improved. Malta was put under siege with heavy air attacks, and as the British concentrated on its defence more convoys of stores and equipment were able to reach Rommel's forces. While the British prepared Operation 'Acrobat' to drive the Germans back to Tripoli, Rommel launched a surprise lightning strike with DAK, including 21st Panzer, which took Cyrenaica again, so he was back in Derna by 3 February 1942. Meanwhile, 21st Panzer had a new commander, appointed on 30 January—Generalmajor Georg von Bismarck.

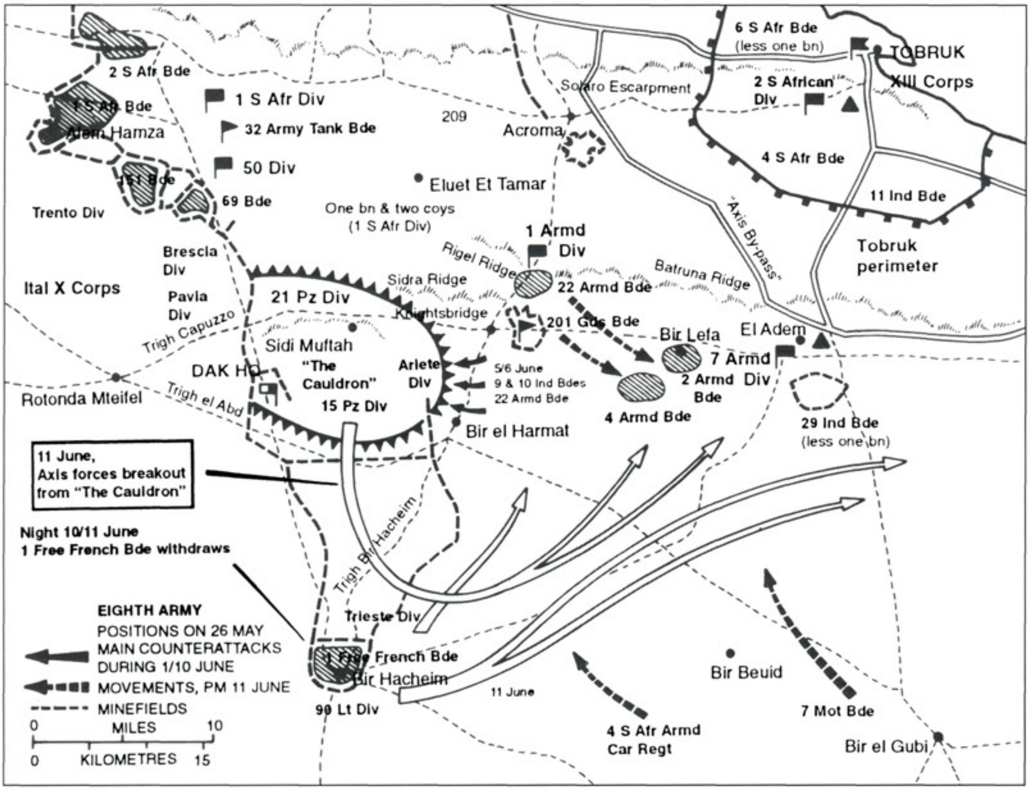
The British and Commonwealth troops were well established at Gazala and this was the scene of the next great battle on 27 May. Rommel used his famous outflanking tactics here, and 21st Panzer was in the centre of a three-division attack on 7th Armoured Division. This developed into a frantic fire fight. For the

Official tank strength at 25 May 1942

PzKpfw II	**29**
PzKpfw III	**122**
PzKpfw IV	**19**
PzBefWg	**4**
Total	**110**

Below and opposite: **The 'Cauldron'**
After the 'Crusader' battles, Eighth Army withdrew to a defence line comprising minefields and defended 'boxes' set up between Gazala on the coast and Bir Hacheim inland. Behind this line were further boxes, including 'Knightsbridge' and El Adem. Even though the armoured divisions were disposed to the rear, this defence line was extremely static. After three months of inactivity, during which DAK had received reinforcements and new tanks, Rommel launched an ambitious attack on the Gazala line on the night of 26/27 May, achieving considerable surprise as Ultra reports of DAK preparations had not been entirely believed by Eighth Army. While Italian forces engaged the Gazala line at the coast, 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions, with 90th Light, moved fast round the flank at Bir Hacheim and turned north. Eighth Army was unprepared for this and DAK took full advantage, 21st Panzer bypassing 'Knightsbridge' and reaching Point 209, only nine miles from the coast road. But this overstretched DAK's supply lines, and lack of fuel and late but determined Eighth Army resistance brought the advance to a halt. On 29 May Rommel personally led in a supply column from Bir el Harmat to refuel the tanks. DAK was too exposed, however, and withdrew


GAZALA
Group Cruewell, early afternoon, 26 May
15 Lt Inf Bde
Via Balbia
Eighth Army (Ritchie) HQ at Gambut (5 Ind Div and 10 Ind Bde in reserve)
Sabratha Div
Trento Div
Brescia Div
Pavia Div
Italian and XXI Corps
Bir Temrad
Sidi Breghisc
Alem Hamza
1 S Afr Div
32 Army Tank Bde
Seacol
Commonwealth Keep
209
28 May
Eluet Et Tamar
Bde (less one bn)
1 Army Tank Bde
50 Div
Stopcol
Acroma
Solaro Escarpment
6 S Afr Bde (less one bn)
TOBRUK
2 S Afr Div
4 S Afr Bde
9 Ind Inf Bde (less one bn at El Adem)
To Gambut, 16 miles
Axis By-pass
Tobruk perimeter
Rigel Ridge
Sidra Ridge
201 Gds Bde
Batruna Ridge
2 Armd Bde
El Adem
Belhamed
El Duda
Trigh Capuzzo
Sidi Rezegh
XIII Corps
Bir Lefa
Rotonda Segnali
Rotonda Mteifel
Trigh el Abd
150 Bde
Sidi Muftah
Knightsbridge
"The Cauldron"
22 Armd Bde
Bir el Harmat
1 June to "Bridgehead"
1 Armd Div
27 May
Rommel, 2100 hrs, 26 May
31 May/1 June, 150 Bde destroyed
Trieste Div (in error)
Italian XX Corps
90 Lt Div
15 and 21 Pz Divs (DAK)
Ariete Div
Trigh Bir Hacheim
21 Pz Div
XXX Corps
4 Armd Bde
7 Armd Div
1 Free French Bde
Bir Hacheim
Bir Beuid
29 Ind Bde
Bir el Gubi
3 Ind Mot Bde
7 Mot Bde
Retma
15 Pz Div
90 Lt Div
0600 hrs, 27 May
AXIS
INITIAL ATTACKS
ROMMEL WITHDRAWS ARMOUR INTO "BRIDGEHEAD" ("THE CAULDRON") 30 MAY/1 JUNE
0 MILES 15
0 KILOMETRES 25
EIGHTH ARMY – POSITIONS ON 26 MAY
CORPS HEADQUARTERS
DIVISIONAL HEADQUARTERS
BRIGADE HEADQUARTERS
MINEFIELDS
AIRFIELDS AND LANDING FIELDS


6 S Afr Bde (less one bn)
TOBRUK
XIII Corps
2 S Afr Bde
1 S Afr Bde
Alem Hamza
1 S Afr Div
32 Army Tank Bde
50 Div
150 Bde
69 Bde
Trento Div
209
Acroma
Sollaro Escarpment
2 S African Div
4 S Afr Bde
11 Ind Bde
Eluet Et Tamar
One bn & two coys (1 S Afr Div)
1 Armd Div
Rigel Ridge
Batruna Ridge
Axis By-pass
Tobruk perimeter
Brescia Div
Pavia Div
Ital X Corps
21 Pz Div
Sidra Ridge
22 Armd Bde
Knightsbridge
201 Gds Bde
Bir Lefa
El Adem
Trigh Capuzzo
Sidi Muftah
"The Cauldron"
Ariete Div
15 Pz Div
DAK HQ
5/6 June 9 & 10 Ind Bdes 22 Armd Bde
7 Armd Div
2 Armd Bde
4 Armd Bde
Rotonda Mteifel
Trigh el Abd
Bir el Harmat
29 Ind Bde (less one bn)
11 June, Axis forces breakout from "The Cauldron"
Night 10/11 June 1 Free French Bde withdraws
Trigh Bir Hacheim
Trieste Div
1 Free French Bde
Bir Hacheim
90 Lt Div
11 June
Bir Beuid
4 S Afr Armd Car Regt
7 Mot Bde
Bir el Gubi
EIGHTH ARMY POSITIONS ON 26 MAY
MAIN COUNTERATTACKS DURING 1/10 JUNE
MOVEMENTS, PM 11 JUNE
MINEFIELDS
0 MILES 10
0 KILOMETRES 15

back to a bridgehead between Sidi Muftah and Bir Hacheim. On 1 June Rommel attacked again while Eighth Army was still slowly organising a counter-attack. Bir Hacheim box was cut off, as was the Sidi Muftah box. The bridgehead around this box was called the 'Cauldron', and was the scene of the fiercest fighting. Rommel deployed 21st Panzer to the north holding the key Sidra Ridge, 15th Panzer to the south and Ariete Division in the centre. On 5 June Eighth Army counter-attacked in a frontal assault on the bridgehead. Rommel outflanked it from the south (with 15th Panzer and 90th Light); Bir Hacheim was taken, and on 11 June 21st Panzer moved east to attack the Eighth Army northern flank units. This pincer movement was a disaster for Eighth Army and cut off 'Knightsbridge'. 21st Panzer Division captured the key Rigel Ridge and on 13/14 June Eighth Army pulled back, eventually to Alamein. By this time it had only about 50 cruiser and 25 infantry tanks left.

Official tank strength at 15 August 1942

PzKpfw II	14
PzKpfw III	87
PzKpfw IV	18
PzBefWg	2
Total	121

first time the British were using the Grant (M3 medium) tank from America with its useful, though limited, 75mm gun. In this battle 21st Panzer nearly succeeded in taking the key 'Knightsbridge' box, but lost too many tanks due to the unexpected encounter with the Grants. By 5 June the bloody Gazala fighting had reached the stage known as 'The Cauldron'. During the battle, 21st Panzer secured the key Sidra Ridge from which counter-attacks could be staged. While 21st Panzer held this feature Rommel, used his other divisions to 'roll up' the British forces and win the day. British tank losses were huge, German much lighter.

As the British withdrew, Rommel finally took Tobruk in another three-pronged divisional attack. For this, on 20–21 June, 21st Panzer formed the spearhead between 15th Panzer and 90th Light. In an attack from the southeast, 21st Panzer ran straight through to seize the town and the seaport, the brisk action ending with their tanks on the seafront. The flank divisions, meanwhile, took on the dogged defenders inside the perimeter. Nearly 35,000 prisoners were taken in this attack. Demoralised, Eighth Army fell back. But Rommel's forces were weak, too, dependent on British stores and vehicles to keep going. 21st and 15th Panzer only had 44 tanks between them, and when the Germans crossed into Egypt they estimated that four-fifths of their transport was British.

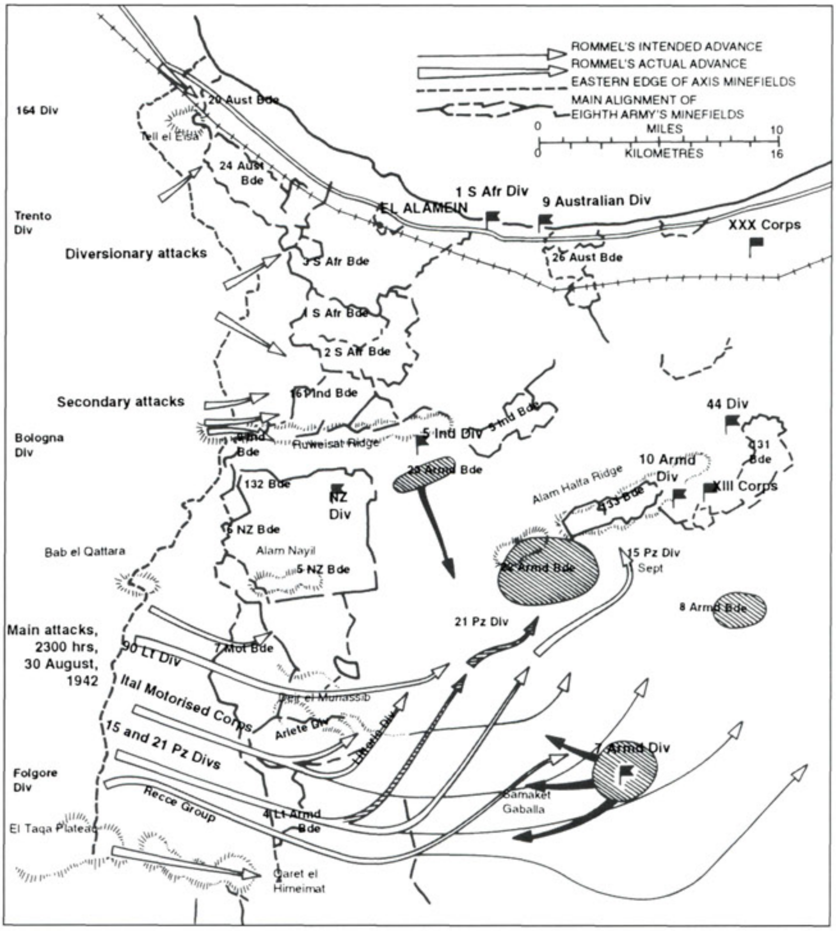
The Eighth Army decided to fall back to a defence line at Mersa Matruh but they had hardly reached there when Rommel struck on 26–27 June. In this action 21st Panzer was again the spearhead of a three-pronged assault, sandwiched between 90th Light and 15th Panzer. They were key to rolling up the British rear (with Rommel riding with them) and Eighth Army now pulled back in some disarray, establishing a defence line at Alamein—at this stage no more than a series of loosely linked boxes. Rommel attacked on 1–3 July, but resolute British defence finally brought his advance into Egypt to a halt. It was the end of a war of

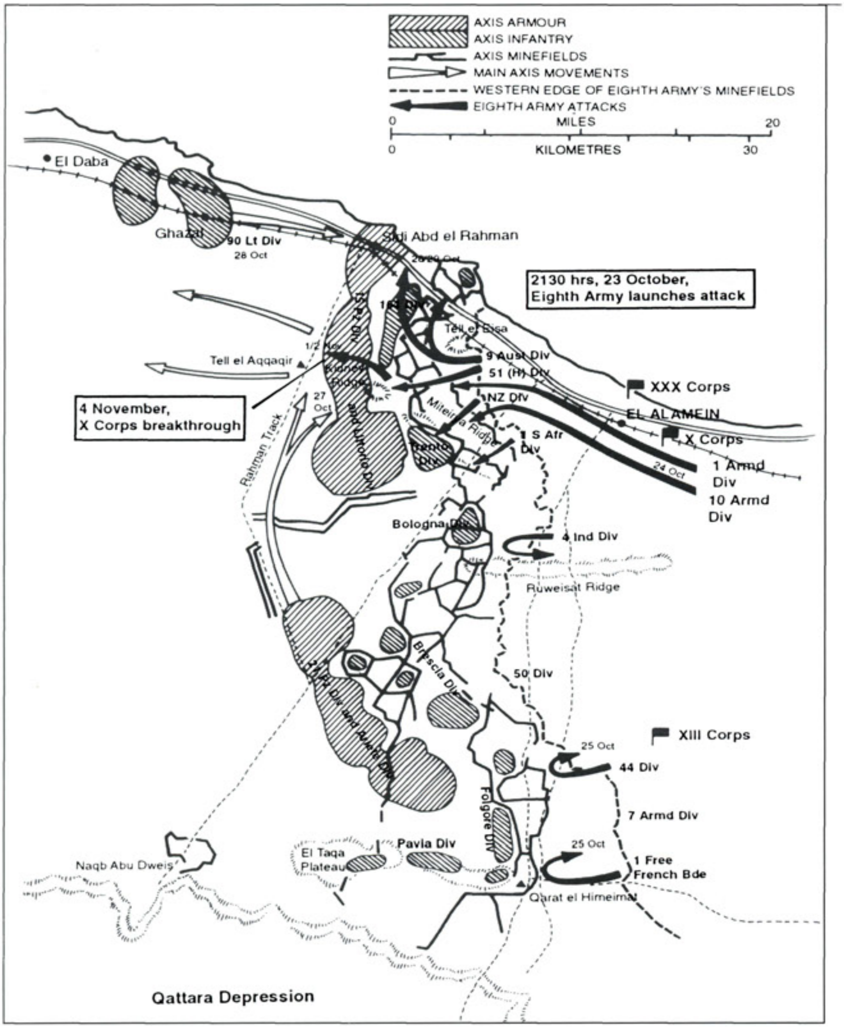
Right: **Alam Halfa**

After the battle at Mersa Matruh, Eighth Army pulled back to Alamein where Auchinleck planned to make the decisive 'no retreat' stand which would prevent Axis forces taking all of Egypt. Forty miles inland from Alamein was the impassable Qattara Depression forming a natural boundary. It was neither possible nor desirable to build a continuous defence line, so the Alamein line was actually held by a series of four defended 'boxes' but with mobile divisional columns held back in the desert for flexible deployment. The southern flank of the line—about 30 miles inland—was open, though strongly mined. Rommel decided to attack the Alamein position on 1 July 1942, before Eighth Army had time to strengthen its defences. In what became known as the First Battle of Alamein, Rommel planned to cut-off and bypass the Alamein box on the coast with 90th Light, and then drive 15th and 21st Panzer Divisions south behind the British lines. However, sturdy defence by the Deir el Shein box and the arrival of mobile columns held up DAK. Next day Rommel changed plans and ordered 15th and 21st Panzer to head east along Ruweisat Ridge, then head for the coast. Superior numbers of British tanks foiled this by attacking DAK's southern flank. Skilful use of 88s knocked out many British tanks, but DAK suffered even more, and was down to to only 26 tanks when the advance was halted. The British flank attack was not pressed home with vigour, however, allowing DAK to pull back with 21st Panzer covering the retreat.

In July DAK received reinforcements, including more divisions and more tanks. Fighting continued in early July with British probes westwards from Alamein and a contest for Ruweisat Ridge involving 21st Panzer Division, but eventually this petered out. Rommel's last attempt to outflank and 'roll up' Eighth Army was at Alam Halfa, 30 August–1 September 1942. DAK now had 166 PzKpfw IIIs, 73 with the long 50mm gun, and 37 PzKpfw IVs, including 27 'Specials' with the 75mm gun. Rommel attacked by night through the minefield on the southern flank of the Alamein line with 15th and 21st Panzer on the right flank. The minefields were denser than expected, slowing the advance, and in a mortar attack von Bismarck, commander of 21st Panzer, was killed. Surprise was lost. DAK was held up by 22nd Armoured Brigade and harried by 7th Armoured Division.

Short of fuel and opposed by superior numbers, as well as being exposed to heavy RAF bombing, Rommel withdrew to six miles east of his original start line. The only good thing to come from the battle was confirmation of the superiority of the PzKpfw IV 'Specials'. In the tank battles Eighth Army lost 69 tanks against 49 for DAK.


ROMMEL'S INTENDED ADVANCE
ROMMEL'S ACTUAL ADVANCE
EASTERN EDGE OF AXIS MINEFIELDS
MAIN ALIGNMENT OF EIGHTH ARMY'S MINEFIELDS
0 MILES 10
0 KILOMETRES 16
164 Div
20 Aust Bde
Tell el Eisa
24 Aust Bde
1 S Afr Div
9 Australian Div
EL ALAMEIN
XXX Corps
Trento Div
Diversionary attacks
3 S Afr Bde
26 Aust Bde
1 S Afr Bde
2 S Afr Bde
Secondary attacks
161 Ind Bde
44 Div
Bologna Div
Armd Bde
Ruweisat Ridge
5 Ind Div
5 Ind Bde
22 Armd Bde
10 Armd Div
131 Bde
Alam Halfa Ridge
133 Bde
XIII Corps
132 Bde
NZ Div
6 NZ Bde
Alam Nayil
Bab el Qattara
5 NZ Bde
22 Armd Bde
15 Pz Div 1 Sept
8 Armd Bde
21 Pz Div
Main attacks, 2300 hrs, 30 August, 1942
90 Lt Div
7 Mot Bde
Ital Motorised Corps
Deir el Munassib
Ariete Div
Littorio Div
15 and 21 Pz Divs
7 Armd Div
Folgore Div
Recce Group
Samaket Gaballa
4 Lt Armd Bde
El Taqa Plateau
Qaret el Himeimat


▨ AXIS ARMOUR
▨ AXIS INFANTRY
AXIS MINEFIELDS
MAIN AXIS MOVEMENTS
WESTERN EDGE OF EIGHTH ARMY'S MINEFIELDS
EIGHTH ARMY ATTACKS
0 MILES 20
0 KILOMETRES 30
El Daba
Ghazal
90 Lt Div
28 Oct
Sidi Abd el Rahman
28/29 Oct
2130 hrs, 23 October, Eighth Army launches attack
15 Pz Div
164 Div
Tell el Eisa
Tell el Aqqaqir
1/2 Nov
Kidney Ridge
9 Aust Div
51 (H) Div
XXX Corps
4 November, X Corps breakthrough
27 Oct
NZ Div
Miteiriya Ridge
EL ALAMEIN
X Corps
Rahman Track
and Littorio Div
Trento Div
1 S Afr Div
24 Oct
1 Armd Div
10 Armd Div
Bologna Div
4 Ind Div
Ruweisat Ridge
Brescia Div
50 Div
21 Pz Div and Ariete Div
XIII Corps
25 Oct
44 Div
Folgore Div
7 Armd Div
El Taqa Plateau
Pavia Div
25 Oct
1 Free French Bde
Naqb Abu Dweis
Qarat el Himeimat
Qattara Depression

Left: Alamein

Under its new commander, General Montgomery, Eighth Army turned the Alamein line into a formidable defence in depth, with minefields and extensive barbed wire obstacles, strongpoints and a huge build up of forces, notably tanks and artillery, in readiness for a big offensive. The Axis forces, too, built up a defence line including minefields, but DAK was at some disadvantage both in strength and in being pinned to a static defence line when it was used to more fluid deployment. 21st Panzer Division was deployed on the southern flank, whereas the main British offensive opened (at 21.40hrs on 23 October 1942) with a massive barrage on the northern front which took the Axis forces by surprise. There was a much smaller opening barrage in the south. Rommel was on leave and his successor, Stumme, died of a heart attack at the start of the battle. Rommel returned on 25 October, but until he arrived there was an uncertain and slow Axis reaction. On 23 October, the British XXX Corps in the north and XIII Corps in the south began to advance. The latter's task was to engage and pin down 21st Panzer Division. In this they were unsuccessful, and in the opening fighting 21st Panzer lost only 15 tanks. Kidney Ridge and Point 29 to the north of it were considered key positions by Rommel and he ordered up forces, including part of 21st Panzer, to take these. But Kidney Ridge was well defended by the Rifle Brigade with well-sited anti-tank guns, and the attacks were repulsed. Many tanks and 88s were lost.

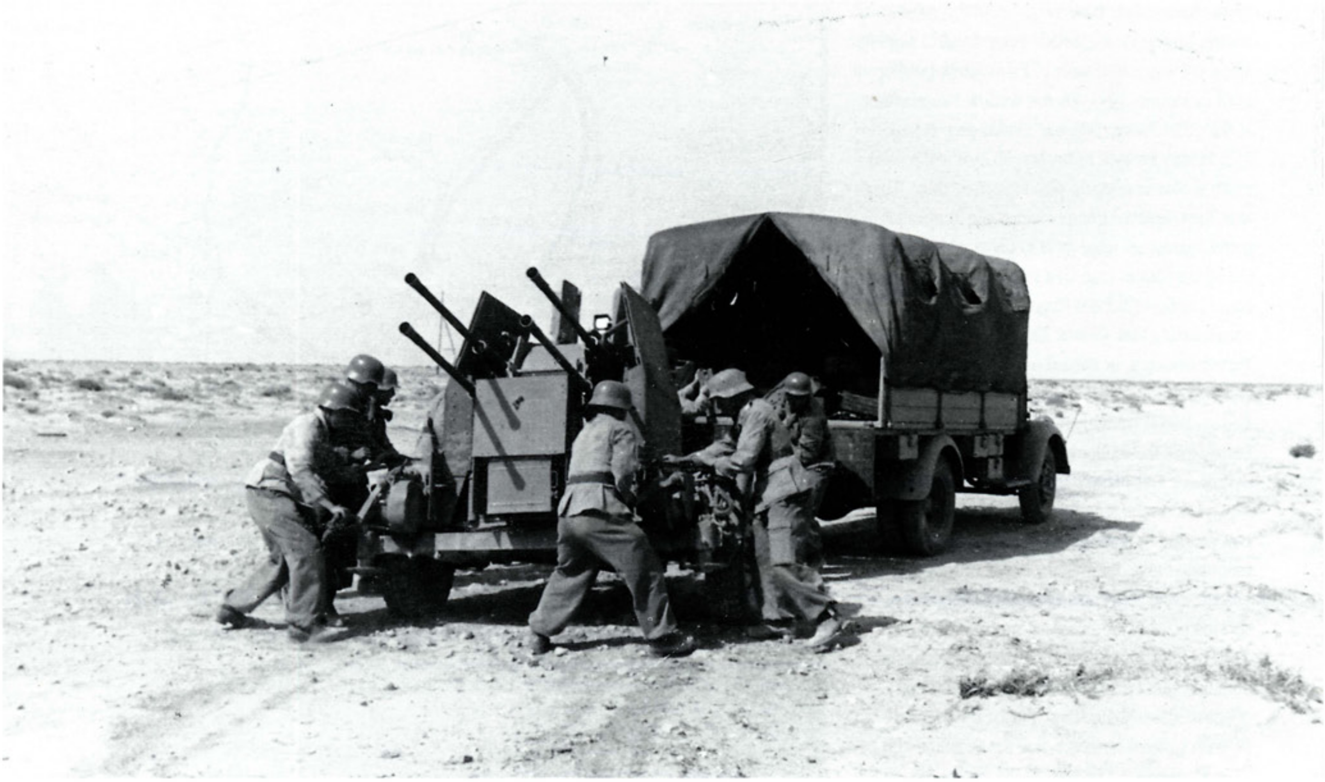
The first phase of the British attack—codenamed 'Lightfoot'—lost momentum and on 1 November a new offensive, Operation 'Supercharge', began. During this 21st and 15th Panzer Divisions made a spirited counter-attack on the Rahman track at Tel el Aqiqir but the new Sherman (M4 medium) tanks of 9th Armoured Brigade proved formidable, and DAK had only 35 tanks left after this battle. With their fighting strength so depleted, DAK had little option but to fall back, allowing Eighth Army to break out of the Alamein position in pursuit, as DAK made a fighting retreat back towards Cyrenaica.

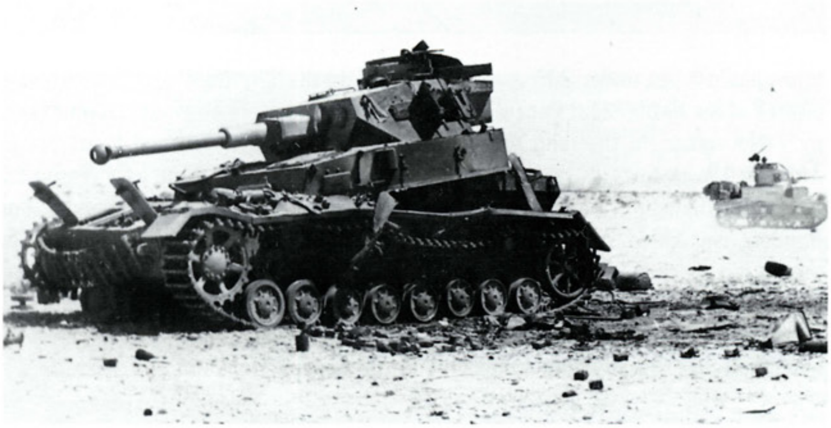
dashing movement for him, but he made one last attempt to outflank Eighth Army in the Battle of Alam Halfa on 31 July 1942. By now General Montgomery had become Eighth Army commander and both sides, but particularly the British, were starting to build up their defences and resources. Though Rommel tried to outflank his enemy here, his relatively feeble forces were easily repulsed by much stronger British armoured brigades. During the Alam Halfa action, 21st Panzer's commander, von Bismarck, was killed. Oberst C. H. Lungerhausen took over temporary command until Generalmajor Heinz von Randow arrived on 18 September.

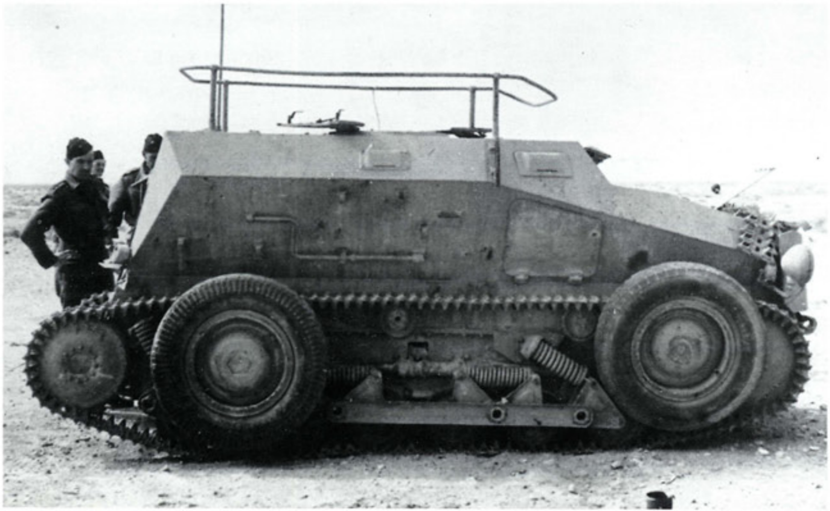
Now started the well documented El Alamein period, the beginning of the end for German ambitions in North Africa. The desert war became a war of heavy attrition that the Germans could not win, thanks to the massive resources the British now enjoyed. Among these was new M4 medium (Sherman) tank from the United States. Its turret-mounted high-velocity 75mm gun made it superior to any tank the Germans then had in North Africa.

When the battle at Alamein took place, 21st Panzer was well inland next to the Italian Ariete Division. The disparity in numbers between the two sides was huge. When the British offensive began on 23 October 1942, Eighth Army had 1,100

Far left: Well-known propaganda photo of British infantry 'capturing' a PzKpfw III.







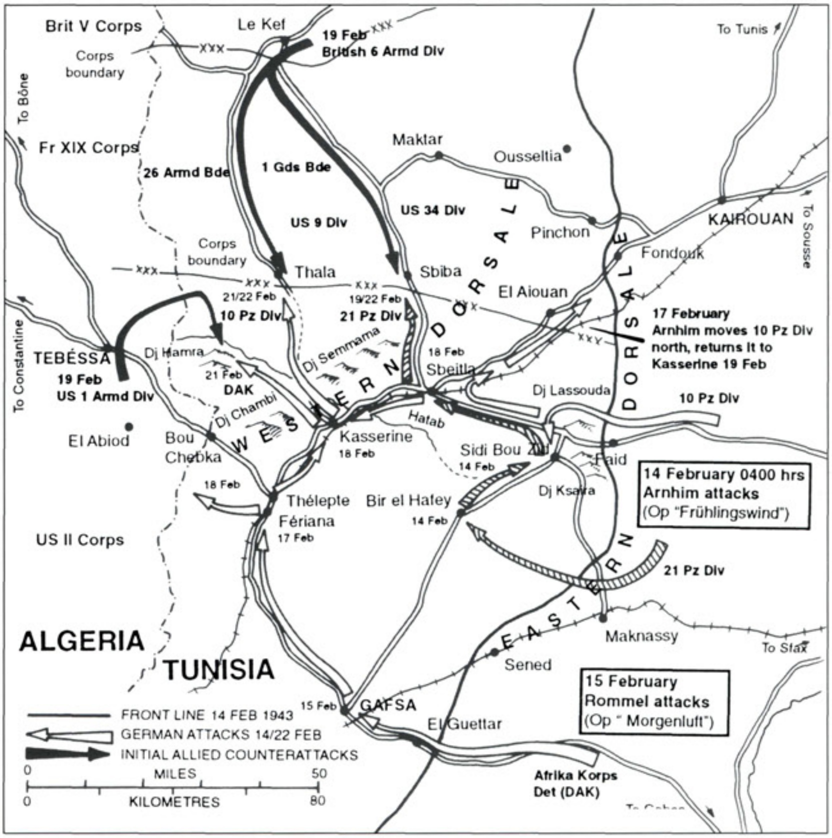
Opposite page, above: An infantry platoon on the march in the Alamein period, carrying full equipment and probably about to man a defence position.

Opposite page, below: Aftermath of Alamein. British troops examine an abandoned 88 after the German pull out. From the number of empty cartridge cases around the weapon, it appears to have seen hard action. Note the 'kill' bands painted round the barrel.

Above: A 2cm Flakvierling 38 is brought rapidly into action by its crew as enemy aircraft approach. A very effective weapon against low-flying aircraft, this one is probably operated by one of the light companies of 33rd Flak Regiment.

Left: Knocked out in the Alam Halfa battle is one of the formidable, and then new, PzKpfw IV 'Specials' with the long-barrel high-velocity 75mm gun.

Below left: One of the rarer vehicles used in the desert war was the Austrian-built Saurer RK7, Sd Kfz 254, which was a wheel-cum-track observation vehicle issued to some self-propelled artillery regiments.


Brit V Corps
Le Kef
Corps boundary
XXX
19 Feb
British 6 Armd Div
To Bône
Fr XIX Corps
26 Armd Bde
1 Gds Bde
Maktar
Ousseltia
US 34 Div
US 9 Div
Corps boundary
Thala
Sbiba
Pinchon
Fondouk
KAIROUAN
To Tunis
To Sousse
21/22 Feb
10 Pz Div
19/22 Feb
21 Pz Div
El Aiouan
17 February
Arnhim moves 10 Pz Div north, returns it to Kasserine 19 Feb
To Constantine
TEBÉSSA
19 Feb
US 1 Armd Div
Dj Hamra
21 Feb
DAK
Dj Semmama
Dj Chambi
18 Feb
Sbeitla
Dj Lassouda
10 Pz Div
WESTERN DORSALE
EASTERN DORSALE
Hatab
El Abiod
Bou Chebka
Kasserine
18 Feb
Sidi Bou Zid
14 Feb
Faid
14 February 0400 hrs
Arnhim attacks
(Op "Frühlingswind")
18 Feb
Thélepte
Fériana
17 Feb
Bir el Hafey
14 Feb
Dj Ksaira
US II Corps
21 Pz Div
Maknassy
To Sfax
ALGERIA
TUNISIA
Sened
15 February
Rommel attacks
(Op " Morgenluft")
15 Feb
GAFSA
El Guettar
FRONT LINE 14 FEB 1943
GERMAN ATTACKS 14/22 FEB
INITIAL ALLIED COUNTERATTACKS
0
MILES
50
0
KILOMETRES
80
Afrika Korps
Det (DAK)

Right: **Kasserine Pass**

During Rommel's last period of command in North Africa (he was commander of Panzergruppe Afrika until 21 January 1943, when it became Panzerarmee Afrika), 21st Panzer Division handed over its tanks to 15th Panzer Division in the Mareth Line and moved north to Sfax to re-equip with tanks held there. They were then deployed inland to Southern Tunisia to guard against an Allied drive to Gabes which would cut off the Mareth Line. 21st Panzer now came under control of Generaloberst Jürgen von Arnim, commanding west Tunisia. Using 10th and 21st Panzer Divisions, he carried out a bold offensive at the end of January/early February to seize the rugged Eastern Dorsal (roughly Bouarada to Gafsa). 21st Panzer took the southerly passes and at Faiad virtually destroyed a Free French/American force of II Corps which lost several battalions. Control of 21st Panzer now reverted to Rommel, who sought to take the next mountain range, the Western Dorsal, through Kasserine and Sbiba on 14 February. Sbiba was a sticking point (with minefields and good defences) so 21st Panzer was switched to Kasserine, backing up 10th and 15th Panzer Divisions. The week-long offensive alarmed the Allies, and 1st US Armored Division suffered severely before the Germans withdrew in good order.

Rommel's last offensive was at Medenine on 6 March 1943 against the British forces facing the Mareth Line. 10th, 15th, 21st Panzer and 90th Light were committed, but it was a massive failure against 460 well-sited British anti-tank guns and 300 tanks. DAK lost 50 tanks in a day's fighting and made no headway. Rommel, now very sick, handed over command to von Arnim and returned to Germany on 9 March.

tanks against just under 200 available to DAK. In the 'Lightfoot' and 'Supercharge' phases of the battle, 21st Panzer suffered severely and were down to just four tanks by 7 November. In the long retreat that followed, as the renamed Panzerarmee Afrika fell back towards Tunis, 21st Panzer spent most of its time as a rearguard. In an action near Tripoli on 21 December, another divisional commander, von Randow, was killed. Attrition was so great and the fighting so desperate, that by the time it reached Tunis, 21st Panzer had ceased to operate as a unified formation but was split up in January 1943 into battle groups (*Kampfgruppen*)—in this case Battle Groups Pfeiffer and Gruen. In February 1943 these had changed (in command and composition) to become Battle Groups Stenkhoff and Schuette.

21st Panzer Division losses in North Africa

Division Staff
200th Mapping detachment
200th Print Shop

5th Panzer Regiment
- HQ Staff, Staff Coy
- 2 x Battalions each of Staff, Staff Coy, 4 x Coys, 1 x Armd Repair Coy

192nd PzGr Regiment
- HQ Staff, Staff Coy
- 4 x Bns and 13th Coy

21st Pz Recce Bn
- HQ Staff and 3 x Coys

39th Panzerjäger Bn
- HQ Staff and 3 x Coys

305th Army Flak Bn
- HQ Staff, Staff Bty,
- 3 x Btys each with HQ Staff, Staff Bty, 3 x Btys, 1 x lt Supply Column

155th Pz Arty Regiment
- HQ Staff, Staff Bty
- 3 x Bns each of HQ Staff, Staff Bty and total of 5 Btys

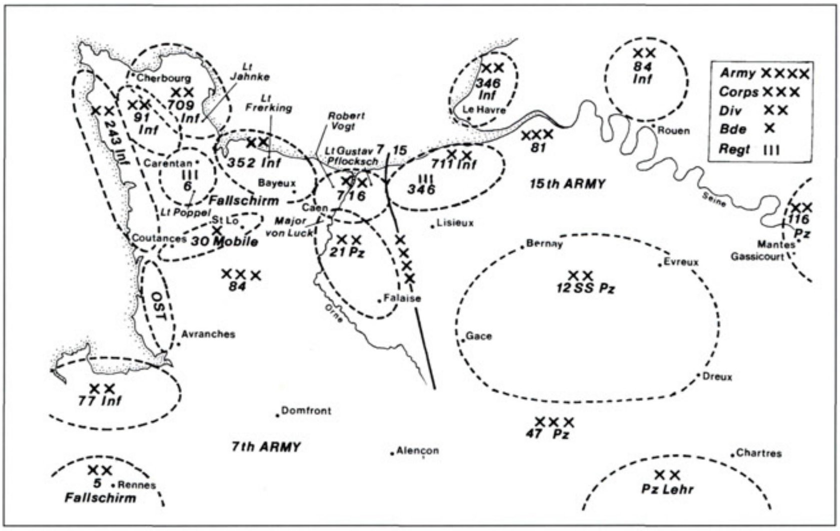
200th Pz Sig Bn
- 2 x Coys, 1 x lt Supply Column

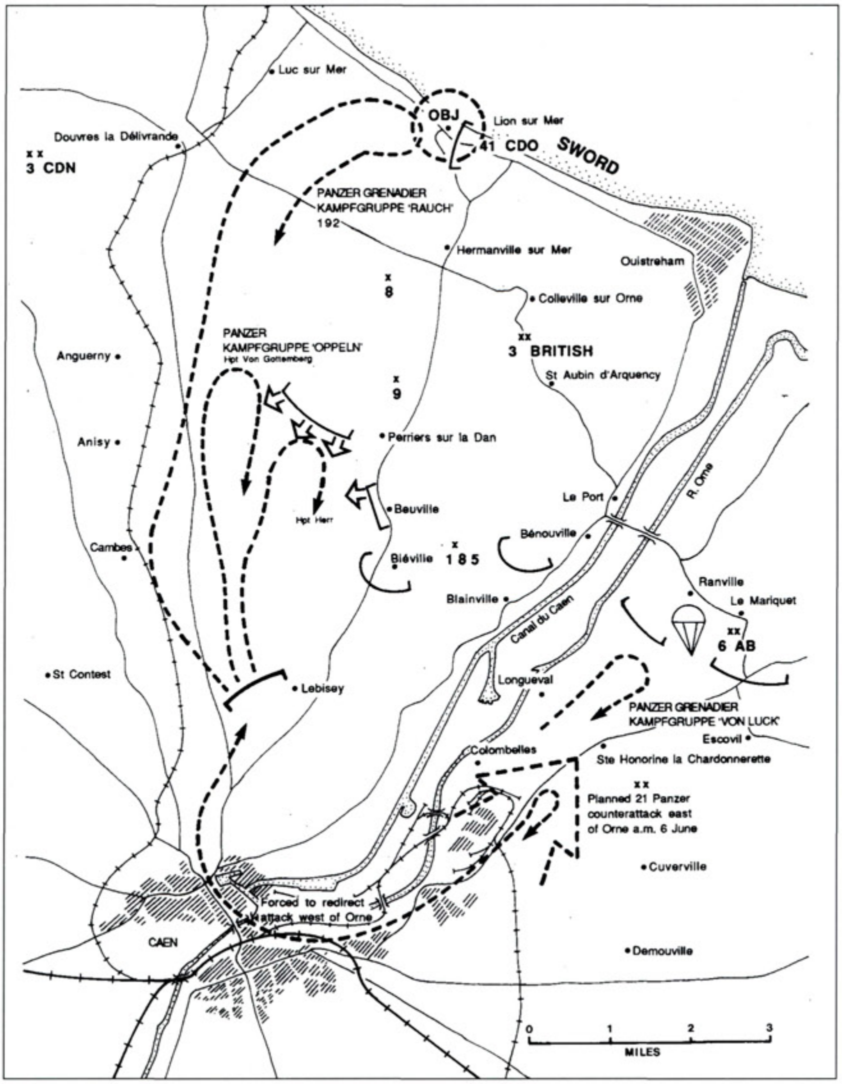
220th Pz Pioneer Bn
- 3 x Coys, 1 x lt Supply Column

200th Feldersatz Bn
- 4 x Coys

Left: British prisoners captured during the successful operations to secure the Eastern Dorsal area of Tunis in February 1943.

Below: The end of the fighting in Tunisia as thousands of German soldiers surrender and are taken into captivity.


Cherbourg
Lt Jahnke
XX 709 Inf
XX 91 Inf
XX 243 Inf
Lt Frerking
Robert Vogt
XX 346 Inf
Le Havre
XX 84 Inf
Army XXXX
Corps XXX
Div XX
Bde X
Regt III
Rouen
XXX 81
Carentan
III 6 Fallschirm
XX 352 Inf
Bayeux
Lt Gustav Pflocksch
XX 716
7 15
XX 711 Inf
III 346
15th ARMY
Seine
XX 116 Pz
Mantes Gassicourt
Lt Poppel
St Lo
Caen
Major von Luck
Lisieux
Coutances
X 30 Mobile
XX 21 Pz
Bernay
Evreux
XXX 84
OST
Falaise
Orne
XX 12 SS Pz
Avranches
Gace
Dreux
XX 77 Inf
Domfront
XXX 47 Pz
7th ARMY
Alençon
Chartres
XX 5 Fallschirm
Rennes
XX Pz Lehr


Luc sur Mer
OBJ
Lion sur Mer
41 CDO
SWORD
Douvres la Délivrande
XX 3 CDN
PANZER GRENADIER KAMPFGRUPPE 'RAUCH' 192
Hermanville sur Mer
Ouistreham
X 8
Colleville sur Orne
PANZER KAMPFGRUPPE 'OPPELN' Hpt Von Gottemberg
XX 3 BRITISH
Anguerny
St Aubin d'Arquency
X 9
Perriers sur la Dan
Anisy
R. Orne
Le Port
Beuville
Hpt Herr
Bénouville
Cambes
Biéville
X 185
Ranville
Le Mariquet
Blainville
Canal du Caen
XX 6 AB
St Contest
Lebisey
Longueval
PANZER GRENADIER KAMPFGRUPPE 'VON LUCK'
Escovil
Colombelles
Ste Honorine la Chardonnerette
XX Planned 21 Panzer counterattack east of Orne a.m. 6 June
Cuverville
Forced to redirect attack west of Orne
CAEN
Demouville
0 1 2 3
MILES

The final operation as a complete division was for an attack on the Kasserine Pass on 19 February. This attack petered out, and for the confused last weeks in Tunis the division split again into battle groups, including a revived Battle Group Pfeiffer. This group surrendered on 11 May 1943, and the remaining forces did the same two days later.

The nominal divisional commanders in the last months of its existence were Oberst H. G. Hildebrandt, who went sick on 25 April 1943. He was replaced by Generalmajor H. G. von Hülsen, the man who finally surrendered the remnants of the division on 13 May.

AFTER THE DESERT

While the true spirit of the original 21st Panzer Division died in Tunis, the proud name came to life again within months as the designation for one of the new divisions that were being formed in France, largely from occupation troops, to face the threat of an expected invasion in Western Europe. Flexible, fast-moving divisions were seen as necessary for responding to a fast-moving invasion army, The type of division formed was known as a *Schnell Division West* (Fast Division West), and it was made fully mobile with tanks, halftracks, self-propelled (SP) artillery and trucks. There was a strong proportion of SP artillery, even if some of the equipment available was of older types. The 931st Fast Brigade (Schnell Brigade 931), an occupation unit, was used as the nucleus for the new division, and other occupation units and army troops were allocated and redesignated as required. One unit, however, 305th Army Flak Battalion, was specially formed for the division.

The new division's commander was Oberst Edgar Feuchtinger (promoted Generalmajor from 1 August 1943) and the division was officially formed at

Rennes, Normandy, on 15 July 1943. The tank regiment was designated 100th Panzer Regiment, made up from various independent companies that were equipped with captured French Hotchkiss and Somua tanks forming two battalions. The infantry element was 125th and 192nd Panzergrenadier Regiments, each having one battalion with halftracks and one with lorries. The armoured artillery regiment was all self-propelled, the 1st Battalion having two batteries equipped with the 105mm Wespe and one battery with the 150mm Hummel. 2nd Battalion had three batteries equipped with the Wespe, and 3rd Battalion had three batteries of 150mm Hummels. Also of note was 200th Sturmgeschütz Battalion equipped with a a staff battery of four Nebelwerfer rocket launchers and four companies with light field howitzers and 75mm Pak 40 towed guns. The 305th Army Flak Battalion had three companies of four 88mm and two 20mm guns, all mounted on half-tracks. With comprehensive support companies (including 220th Panzer Pioneer Battalion with halftracks and a bridging column), the division was well equipped and hard punching for its anti-invasion role.The official listings for the division show that the old French tanks were supposed to be replaced by three companies per battalion each with 22 PzKpfw IIIs and one company with 22 PzKpfw IVs. This does not seem to have been done, however, for it was not until the invasion scare really set in that, on 20 May 1944, the 1st Battalion was told to re-equip with 17 PzKpfw IVs per company, and the 2nd Battalion with 14 PzKpfw IVs per company, all in place of the old French tanks.

As in North Africa, 21st Panzer Division was not long out of the limelight. For a start it was to come once again under command of Erwin Rommel, now a Generalfeldmarschall. With the Allied 'Second Front' expected soon, Rommel was asked by Hitler to carry out a detailed tour of the Atlantic Wall coastal defences—from Denmark to the Spanish border—to check their efficacy. This he did in November and December 1943, and found plenty to put right for there were critical weaknesses. This led to his appointment in late January 1944 as C-in-C of all the German armies from the Netherlands to the Loire.

Rommel believed that if the landing took place, the invaders needed to be pushed back into the sea quickly before they could get a foothold. Rommel's plans called for well-equipped armoured divisions all along the coast to do this. But because the coast was long and manpower was tight, the divisions had to be stretched out covering a big area each. Mobile divisions further inland were supposed to come up in support as required. As fate would have it, when D-Day came on 6 June 1944, it took place in 21st Panzer's area. The division had been based by Rommel near Caen, and it had to cover the entire coastal area where the landings too place. The problem was that Rommel was away from the area

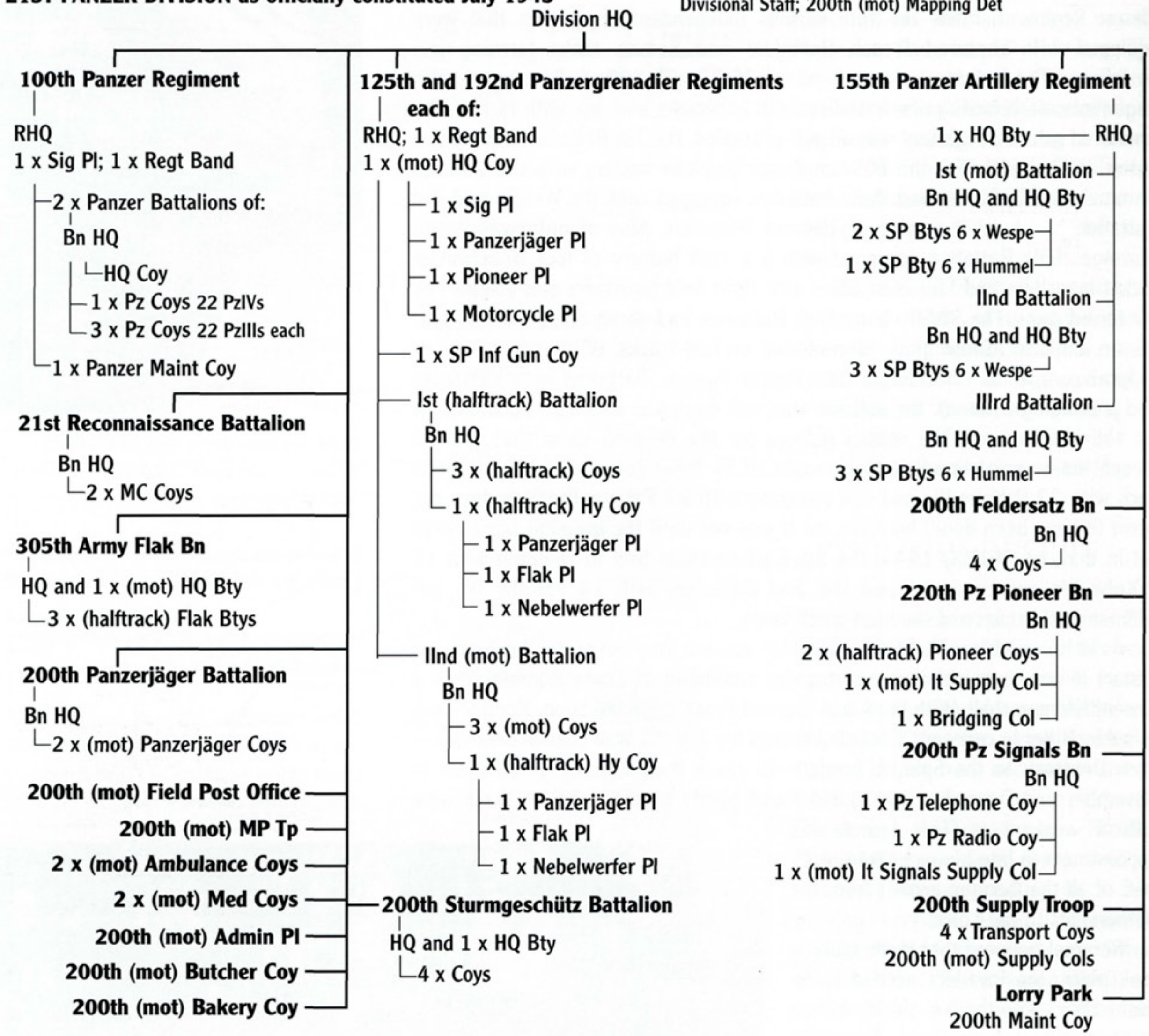
Above: A German Marder III of 716th Infantry Division—operating with 21st Panzer—hurries to attack airborne troops on 6 June.

Opposite page, above: Disposition of German defence forces in Normandy, including 21st Panzer Division.

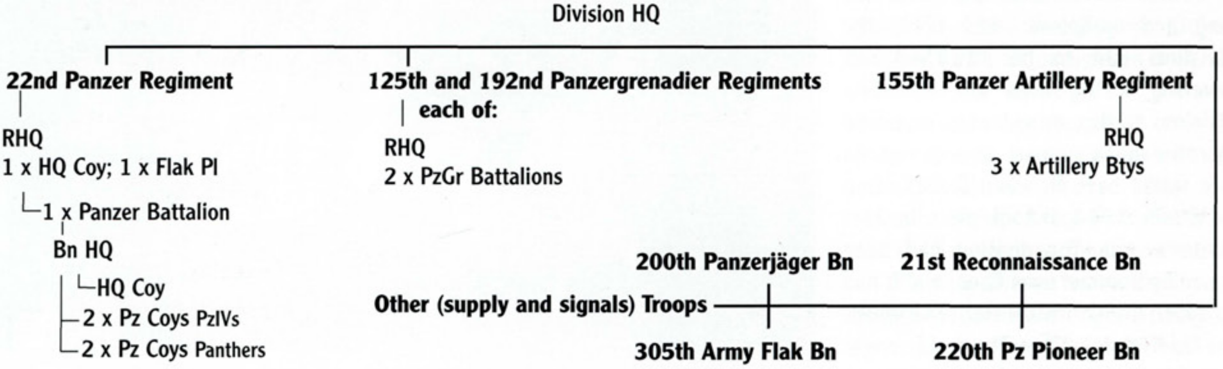
Opposite page, below: The 21st Panzer Division counter-attack on 6 June 1944.

Below: Rommel, as C-in-C in the Normandy area, inspects self-propelled gun crews, probably of 155th Panzer Artillery Regiment, 21st Panzer Division, during an inspection in May 1944.

21ST PANZER DIVISION as officially constituted July 1943

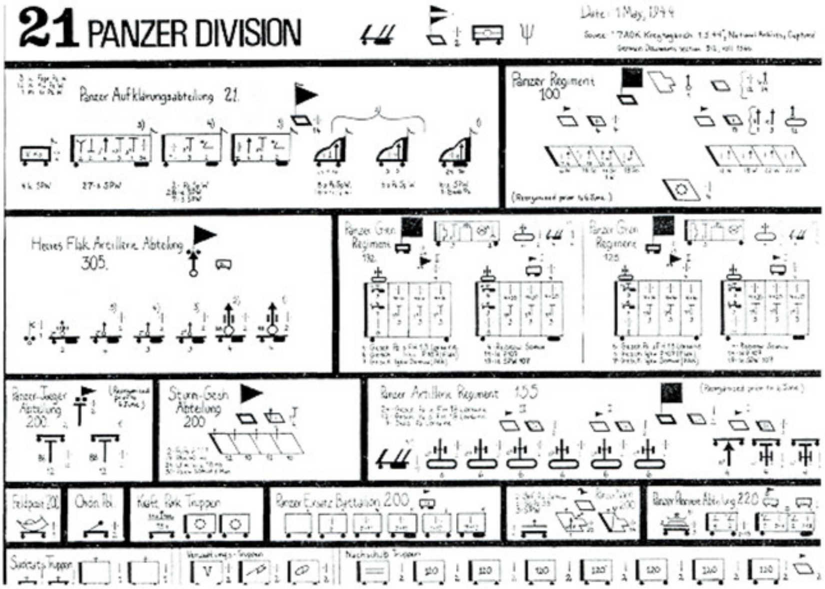

Division HQ
Divisional Staff; 200th (mot) Mapping Det
100th Panzer Regiment
RHQ
1 x Sig Pl; 1 x Regt Band
2 x Panzer Battalions of:
Bn HQ
HQ Coy
1 x Pz Coys 22 PzIVs
3 x Pz Coys 22 PzIIIs each
1 x Panzer Maint Coy
21st Reconnaissance Battalion
Bn HQ
2 x MC Coys
305th Army Flak Bn
HQ and 1 x (mot) HQ Bty
3 x (halftrack) Flak Btys
200th Panzerjäger Battalion
Bn HQ
2 x (mot) Panzerjäger Coys
200th (mot) Field Post Office
200th (mot) MP Tp
2 x (mot) Ambulance Coys
2 x (mot) Med Coys
200th (mot) Admin Pl
200th (mot) Butcher Coy
200th (mot) Bakery Coy
125th and 192nd Panzergrenadier Regiments
each of:
RHQ; 1 x Regt Band
1 x (mot) HQ Coy
1 x Sig Pl
1 x Panzerjäger Pl
1 x Pioneer Pl
1 x Motorcycle Pl
1 x SP Inf Gun Coy
Ist (halftrack) Battalion
Bn HQ
3 x (halftrack) Coys
1 x (halftrack) Hy Coy
1 x Panzerjäger Pl
1 x Flak Pl
1 x Nebelwerfer Pl
IInd (mot) Battalion
Bn HQ
3 x (mot) Coys
1 x (halftrack) Hy Coy
1 x Panzerjäger Pl
1 x Flak Pl
1 x Nebelwerfer Pl
200th Sturmgeschütz Battalion
HQ and 1 x HQ Bty
4 x Coys
155th Panzer Artillery Regiment
1 x HQ Bty
RHQ
Ist (mot) Battalion
Bn HQ and HQ Bty
2 x SP Btys 6 x Wespe
1 x SP Bty 6 x Hummel
IInd Battalion
Bn HQ and HQ Bty
3 x SP Btys 6 x Wespe
IIIrd Battalion
Bn HQ and HQ Bty
3 x SP Btys 6 x Hummel
200th Feldersatz Bn
Bn HQ
4 x Coys
220th Pz Pioneer Bn
Bn HQ
2 x (halftrack) Pioneer Coys
1 x (mot) lt Supply Col
1 x Bridging Col
200th Pz Signals Bn
Bn HQ
1 x Pz Telephone Coy
1 x Pz Radio Coy
1 x (mot) lt Signals Supply Col
200th Supply Troop
4 x Transport Coys
200th (mot) Supply Cols
Lorry Park
200th Maint Coy

21ST PANZER DIVISION on the Eastern Front early 1945


Division HQ
22nd Panzer Regiment
RHQ
1 x HQ Coy; 1 x Flak Pl
1 x Panzer Battalion
Bn HQ
HQ Coy
2 x Pz Coys PzIVs
2 x Pz Coys Panthers
125th and 192nd Panzergrenadier Regiments
each of:
RHQ
2 x PzGr Battalions
155th Panzer Artillery Regiment
RHQ
3 x Artillery Btys
200th Panzerjäger Bn
21st Reconnaissance Bn
Other (supply and signals) Troops
305th Army Flak Bn
220th Pz Pioneer Bn

21ST PANZER DIVISION as at 1 March 1944

- Division HQ: Divisional Staff; 200th (mot) Mapping Det; Divisional Band
  - **100th Panzer Regiment**
    - RHQ
    - 1 x Sig Pl; 1 x Staff Pz Pl 3 tanks
      - Panzer Battalion I
        - Bn HQ
          - Staff Coy 2 x PzIIs, 5 PzIVs
          - 1 x SP Flak Coy
          - 4 x Pz Coys 17 PzIVs each
      - Panzer Battalion II
        - Bn HQ
          - Staff Coy 7 tanks
          - 2 x Coys 18 Somuas
          - 1 x Coy 10 Hotchkiss, 6 Somuas
          - 1 x Coy 17 PzIV
      - 1 x Panzer Maint Coy
  - **200th Pz Recce Battalion**
    - 1st (halftrack) Coy 16 Sd Kfz 250s
    - 2nd Armoured Car Coy
      - 1 x AC Pl 6 Sd Kfz 234/2s (75mm gun)
      - 1 x AC Det 8 Sd Kfz 234/1s, 16 Sd Kfz 222s
    - 3rd (halftrack) Coy 2 Sd Kfz 250/3s, 28 Sd Kfz 250/1s, 2 Sd Kfz 251/2s (80mm mortar), 2 Sd Kfz 251/10s (37mm guns)
    - 4th (halftrack) Coy 2 Sd Kfz 250/3s, 28 Sd Kfz 250/1s, 2 Sd Kfz 251/2s (80mm mortar), 5 Sd Kfz 251/10s (37mm guns)
    - 5th (halftrack) Coy 27 Sd Kfz 251s (2 x flamethrowers, 2 x 75mm guns, 3 x Pak 40s, 1 x 37mm gun)
  - **305th Army Flak Bn**
    - 1 x (mot) Staff Bty
      - 2 x (halftrack) Flak Btys 4 x 88mm, 3 x 20mm
      - 1 x (halftrack) Flak Bty 9 x 37mm, 2 x quad 20mm
      - 1 x Searchlight Batteries
  - **125th Panzergrenadier Regiment**
    - RHQ
    - 1 x (mot) Staff Coy
      - 1 x Sig Pl
      - 1 x Panzerjäger Pl
      - 1 x Pioneer Pl
      - 1 x Motorcycle Pl
      - 1 x (mot) Heavy Coy
    - 9th SP Inf Gun Coy
    - 10th Halftrack Nebelwerfer Coy
    - Ist (halftrack) Battalion
      - Bn HQ
        - 3 x (halftrack) Coys
        - 1 x (halftrack) Hy Coy
          - 1 x Panzerjäger Pl
          - 1 x Flak Pl
            - 1 x Panzerzerstörer Sect
    - IInd (mot) Battalion
      - Bn HQ
        - 3 x (mot) Coys
        - 1 x (halftrack) Hy Coy
          - 1 x Panzerjäger Pl
          - 1 x Flak Pl
            - 1 x Panzerzerstörer Sect
  - **200th Sturmgeschütz Battalion**
    - 1 x Staff Bty 1 StuG
      - 4 x Coys each 8 StuG IIIs (105mm guns) 4 x StuG (75mm Pak 40)
  - **200th Panzerjäger Battalion**
    - Bn HQ
      - 2 x (mot) Panzerjäger Coys (12 x 88mm Pak 43s)
  - **155th Panzer Artillery Regiment**
    - RHQ — 1 Staff Bty
    - Ist (mot) Battalion
      - Bn HQ and Staff Bty
      - 2 x (mot) Btys 4 x 122mm hows
      - 1 x (mot) Bty 4 x 100mm K18s
    - IInd Battalion
      - Bn HQ and Staff Bty
      - 2 x SP Btys 6 x Wespe
      - 1 x SP Bty 6 x Hummel
    - IIIrd Battalion
      - Bn HQ and Staff Bty
      - 2 x SP Btys 6 x Wespe
      - 1 x SP Bty 6 x Hummel
  - **200th Feldersatz Bn**
    - Bn HQ
    - 4 x Coys
  - **220th Pz Pioneer Bn**
    - Bn HQ
    - 2 x (halftrack) Pioneer Coys
    - 1 x (mot) Panzerzerstörer Coy
    - 1 x Bridging Col
  - **200th Pz Signals Bn**
    - Bn HQ
    - 1 x Pz Telephone Coy
    - 1 x Pz Radio Coy
    - 1 x (mot) lt Signals Supply Col
  - **200th Supply Troop**
    - 8 x Transport Coys,
  - **Lorry Park**
    - 2 x Maint Coys, 1 x Hy Maint Supply Col
  - **200th (mot) Field Post Office**
  - **200th (mot) MP Tp**
  - **1/, 2/200th (mot) Ambulance Coys**
  - **1/, 2/200th (mot) Med Coys**
  - **200th (mot) Admin Pl**
  - **200th (mot) Butcher Coy**
  - **200th (mot) Bakery Coy**


21 PANZER DIVISION
Date: 1 May, 1944
Panzer Aufklärungsabteilung 21
Panzer Regiment 100
Heeres Flak Artillerie Abteilung 305
Panzer Gren. Regiment 192
Panzer Gren. Regiment 125
Panzer-Jaeger Abteilung 200
Sturm-Gesch. Abteilung 200
Panzer Artillerie Regiment 155
Feldpost 200
Ordn. Pol.
Kraft. Park Truppen
Panzer Ersatz Bataillon 200
Panzer Pionier Abteilung 220
Sanitäts Truppen
Verwaltungs-Truppen
Nachschub Truppen

Above: German document showing order of battle of 21st Panzer Division on 1 May 1944 when covering the Normandy coast.

Above right: One of the self-propelled 20mm Flakpanzer 38s of either 100th Panzer Regiment or 22nd Panzer Regiment (as it was later redesignated) during exercises in the bocage country near the Normandy coast in May 1944. The flak platoon of the Ist Battalion had 12 of these vehicles.

Below right: Knocked-out in the fighting for Caen, this is one of the PzKpfw IV Ausf H tanks of 22nd Panzer Regiment, in July 1944. British troops in the foreground sort out mortar ammunition.

on the day of the invasion. The SS divisions which should have come up to assist were under Hitler's control, and nobody could get them released.

So for the first day of the Normandy landing 21st Panzer was operating alone. Muddled thinking by the area commanders delayed 21st Panzer's early entry into the fray, but the divisional commander himself ordered a 06.30hrs attack on the British paratroops who had landed at Ranville. They gave the Paras a tough time until withdrawn at 10.30hrs, with orders to counter-attack the British advance at Caen. They did well at this and for a time that evening they managed to reach the coast at Lion-sur-Mer and drive a wedge between the adjacent 3rd British and 3rd Canadian Divisions. But Allied air power and sheer numbers of opponents seriously restricted 21st Panzer's abilities. Notably, however, with 12th SS-Panzer Division, they blocked the scheduled early push inland to Villers-Bocage and Evrecy which stretched out I (BR) Corps considerably.

Rommel was back in charge on 9 June and he planned a counter-attack against both the British and American sectors. 21st Panzer was grouped with two SS divisions under Sepp Dietrich, and intended to push northwest to take Bayeux, but this bold plan came to nothing when corps headquarters and all the directing staff were blown away by Allied bombing. The division's final fling in Normandy was to put up a spirited resistance that gave the Guards Armoured Division a hard time and slowed their advance by a day during Operation 'Bluecoat', on 1 August 1944. After this, the battered survivors of 21st Panzer were largely destroyed in the Falaise Pocket during August 1944, but by this time it had merged with 16th Luftwaffe Field Division. The same commander and staff reformed the division in Lorraine in September 1944 by expanding 112th Panzer Brigade. At this time the tank component, 100th Panzer Regiment, may have been equipped with two companies of 17 Panther tanks and two of PzKpfw IVs. The much reduced division took part in the withdrawals through France and Germany, and fought in Epinel, Nancy, Metz and the Saar area. It ended up in Kaiserlautern.

Generalmajor Feuchtinger the originally appointed commander was temporarily replaced from January 15 until March 8 1944 by Generalmajor Oswin Grolig and he in turn was succeeded by Generalmajor Franz Westhoven until 8 May 1944, when Feuchtinger, now a Generalleutnant, again took command.

On 25 January 1945 the division was reformed as a 1944 type Panzer Division (ie much reduced). The commander was Oberst Helmut Zollenkopf. In this form the division contained a single combined battalion based on 22nd Panzer Regiment. It had a staff company, Flak platoon, two companies with Panther tanks and two companies with PzKpfw IV tanks. The last recorded issue of tanks was on 9 February 1945 when the division was directed to the defence of East Germany. It carried out defensive operations at Goerlitz, Slatsk, Cottbus and other areas and surrendered to the Soviet Army on 29 April 1945.

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INSIGNIA & MARKINGS

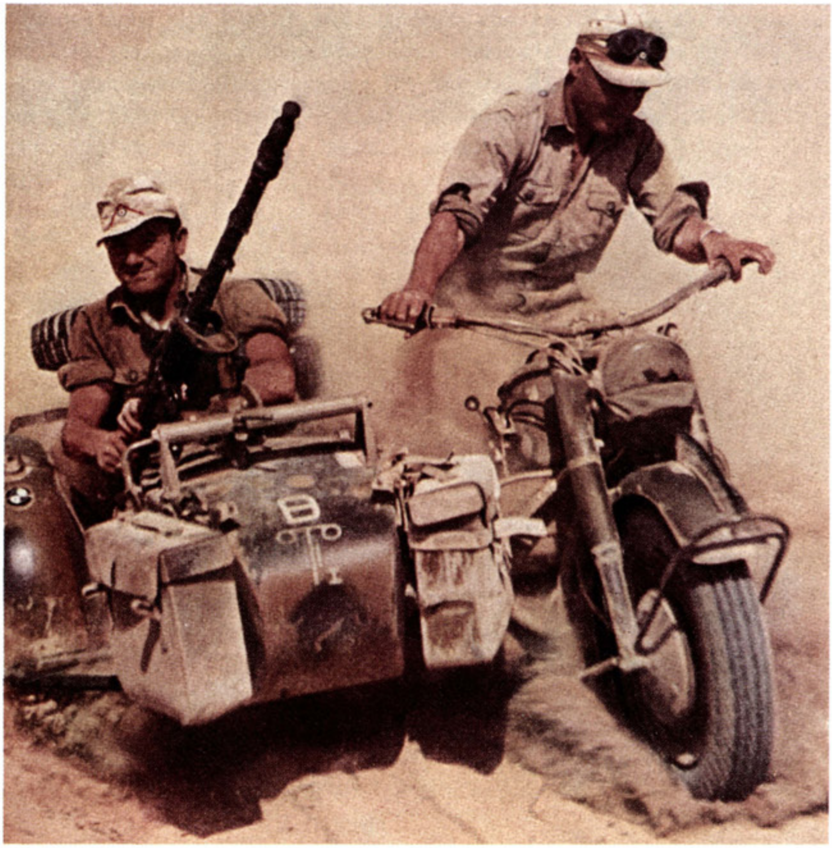
Below: Extensive use was made of motorcycles and motorcycle combinations in DAK. The tactical sign on the sidecar of this one shows it belongs to a towed artillery battery.

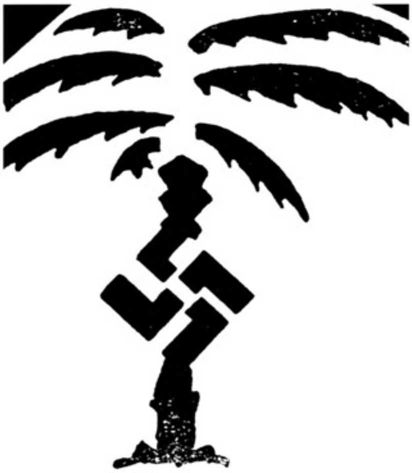
Right: A PzKpfw III Ausf E of 5th Panzer Regiment in Tripoli soon after arrival in North Africa. It is still in the European Panzer grey finish and carries the formation sign of 3rd Panzer Division on the front, the unit from which 5th Panzer Regiment's equipment was drawn.

COLOURS

The vehicles that first went to Libya in February-March 1941, and indeed most of the later replacement and reinforcement supplies, were all in the colours applied for Europe. In essence this was an overall 'Panzer grey' for tanks (a dark grey with a blueish tinge) and field grey (a greenish-grey) on other vehicles. Some of the tanks were also in field grey, particularly those shipped later. Because 5th Light went into immediate deployment, most vehicles in the early weeks of the Cyrenaica campaign were still in the dark grey or field grey colours.

To provide a better camouflage for desert conditions a dark yellow (*Dunkelgelb*) was supplied, and this was applied over the the dark original colours.





Above: The DAK symbol.

Sometimes this was done neatly overall, but frequently it was only roughly applied, reflecting the pace of the campaign. Thus some vehicles could be seen part dark, part yellow, and often only upper surfaces were painted, leaving chassis, etc, still grey. Tactical signs were often painted roughly round, leaving them on a patch of the original dark colour. The sand yellow colour was sometimes referred to as ochre, and in the strong summer sun it often faded to a very pale yellow or stone shade. To give extra camouflage, a dark earth paste was supplied which could be thinned with water and applied with brush or spray gun in mottled or rough wavy effects, but there were no hard rules on this, so there was great variation.

When 21st Panzer Division was in Normandy in the summer of 1944, pictorial evidence suggests they stuck firmly to rules issued for vehicle painting by Rommel's HQ, confirmed by postwar interrogation of his staff. In 1943 the Germans adopted a basic sand-yellow for all tanks, and all units were issued with brown and green water-thinned paste to apply camouflage to suit the terrain. This was done universally in Europe, but the mighty Allied air superiority evident at the time of the Normandy invasion caused an overall dark earth to be ordered for tanks and vehicles in that theatre, and the brown and green camouflage colours could be applied over that. This gave much better concealment in the Normandy bocage country against marauding Allied Typhoons and P-47s seeking out tanks for rocket attack.

DAK MARKING

Universally applied, usually front and rear to the left side, but also sometimes showing to the sides, was the Deutsches Afrika Korps symbol, a stylised palm tree with a swastika superimposed. It was often shown in white only, but officially it was applied in white for 5th Light/21st Panzer, green for corps troops, and red for 15th Panzer Division. However, pictures show that the latter also sometimes used white for the symbol.

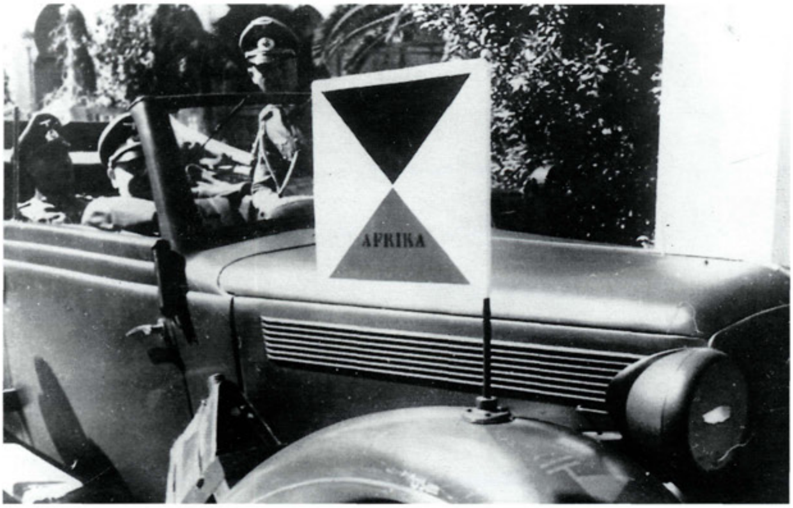
DIVISIONAL MARKINGS

No divisional sign was ever authorised for 5th Light Division, but many of their early vehicles were allocated from 3rd Panzer Division and the divisional sign on these vehicles was retained, sometimes for months. This sign was an inverted Y with two vertical strokes to the right and the sign was usually painted in yellow, sometimes white.

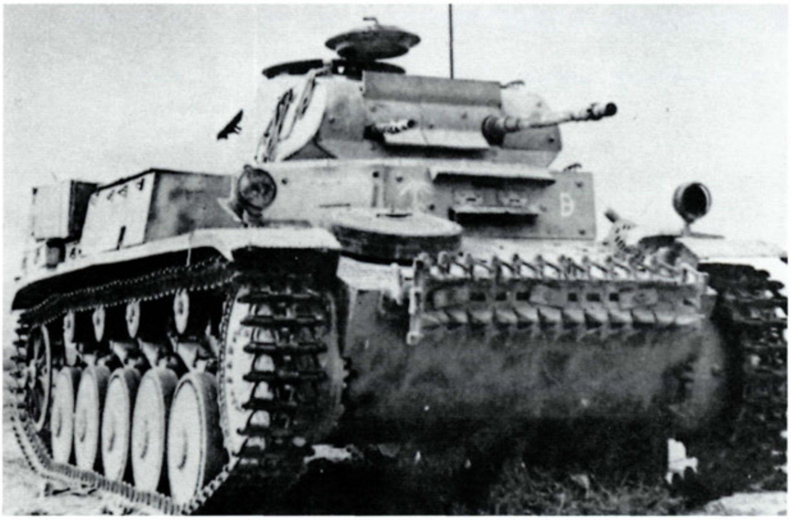
When 5th Light became 21st Panzer a runic symbol was authorised. Best described as a capital D with a horizontal bar in the centre, it could be seen applied in either rounded or elongated form, and was normally white. it was normally displayed on vehicles close to the DAK symbol, but it could also be seen on temporary roadside directional signs.

TACTICAL SIGNS

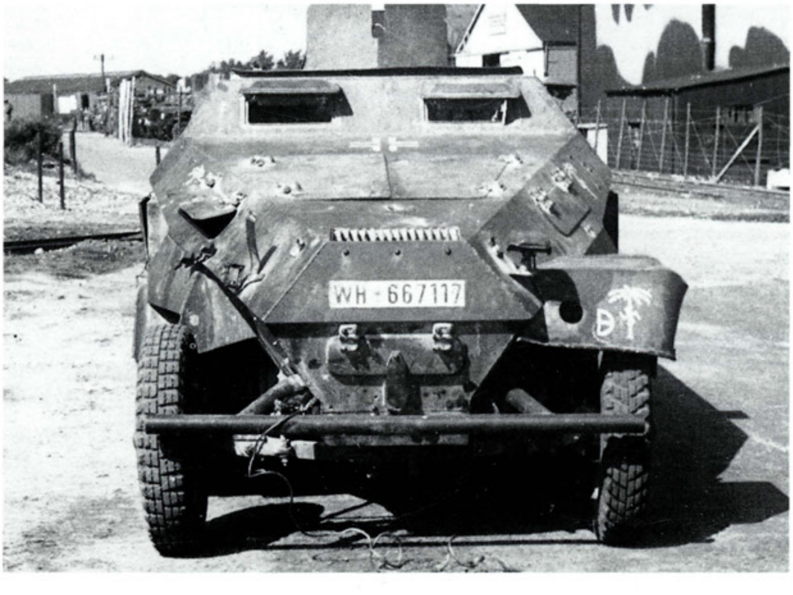
German Panzer troops had evolved an effective system before the war using callsigns whereby a tank's, armoured car's, or armoured halftrack's place in a unit could easily be identified, and unit commanders directing movement could instantly call up any vehicle by its tactical number. A three-digit number was used with the first digit indicating company, second digit the platoon (*Zug*), and third digit the individual vehicle. Before the war, on tanks, this number was usually



Left: Not from 21st Panzer Division, but indicative of the use of tactical symbols, this staff car from Rommel's HQ in Tripoli displays the metal symbol for DAK Corps HQ.



Below left: PzKpfw II command tank showing DAK and 21st Panzer divisional sign.



Bottom left: Halftrack showing 21st Panzer Division and Afrika Korps markings on left front mudguard.

Right: This Sd Kfz 251/6 halftrack command vehicle displays the formation sign of 21st Panzer Division and a tactical sign of a towed artillery battery. Also visible is the *Wehrmacht Heer* numberplate (WH registration) painted on the nose.

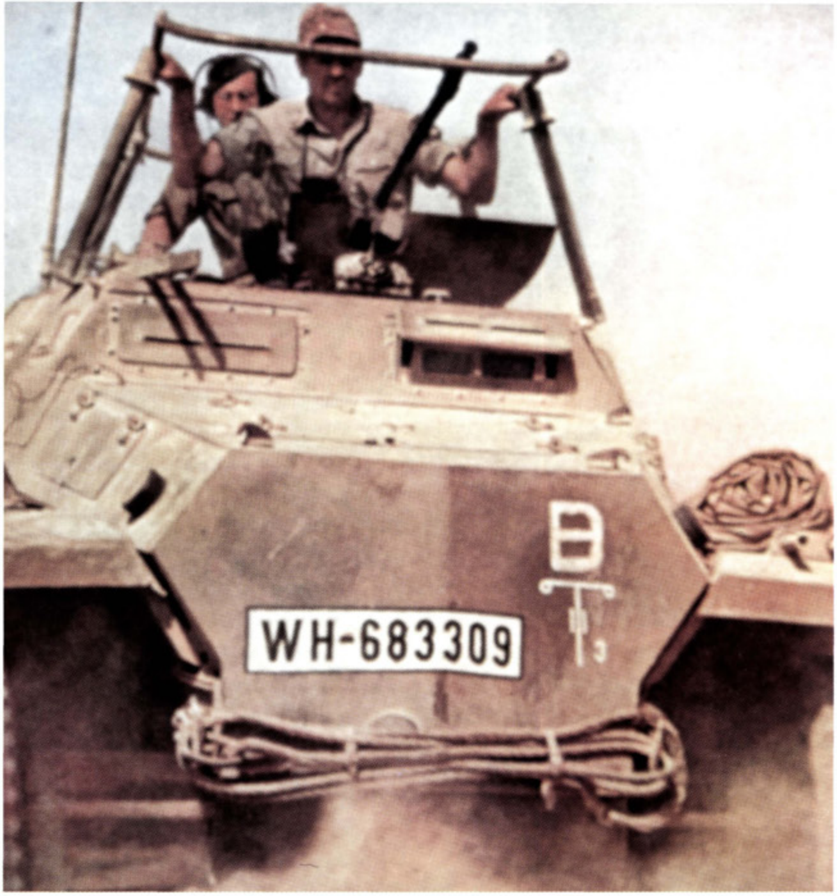
Below: Use of the national flag as an air recognition sign is exemplified on the bonnet of a supply column truck waiting to replenish an armoured unit.

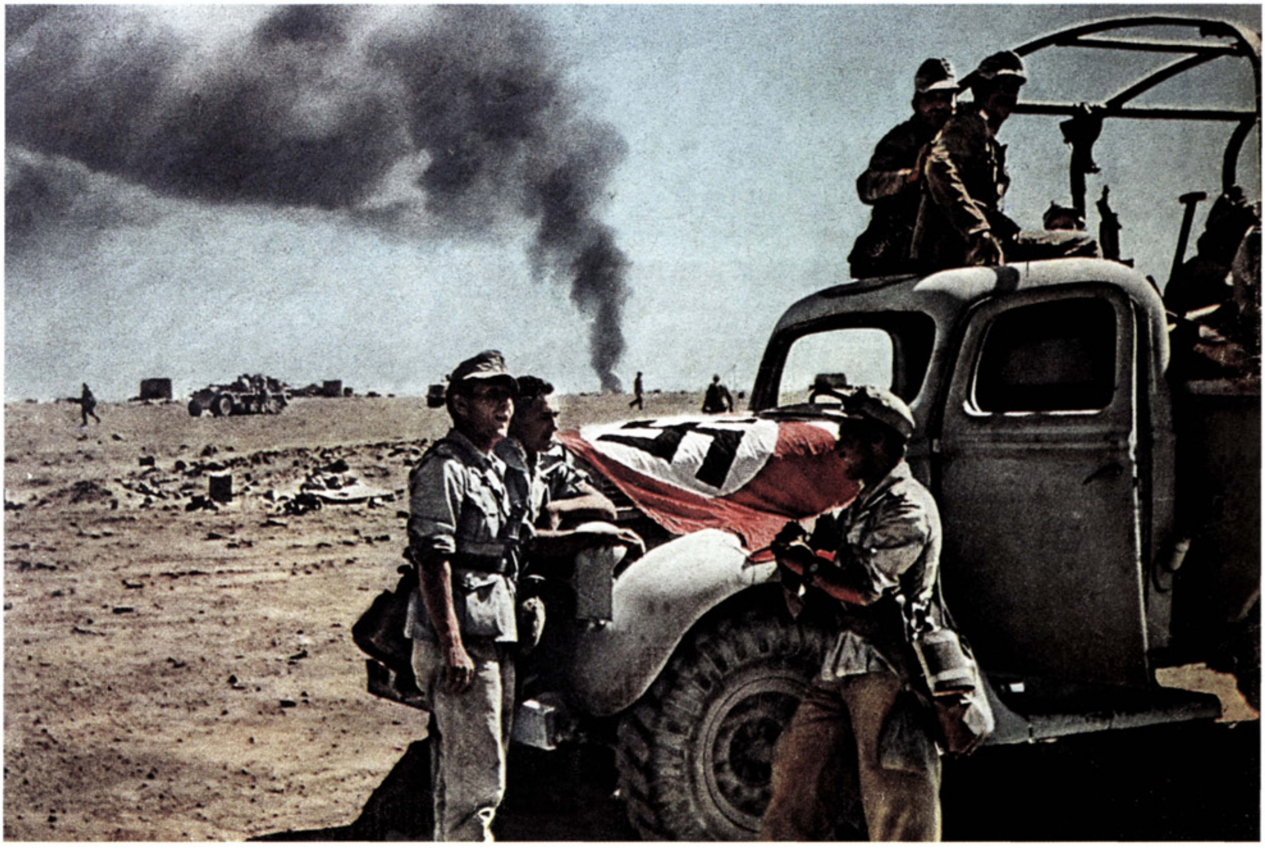
Opposite page, above left: Variations of the tropical uniform are shown by Rommel and his staff officers near Bardia in 1941. The reed-green uniform soon faded or washed out to shades between light green and stone.

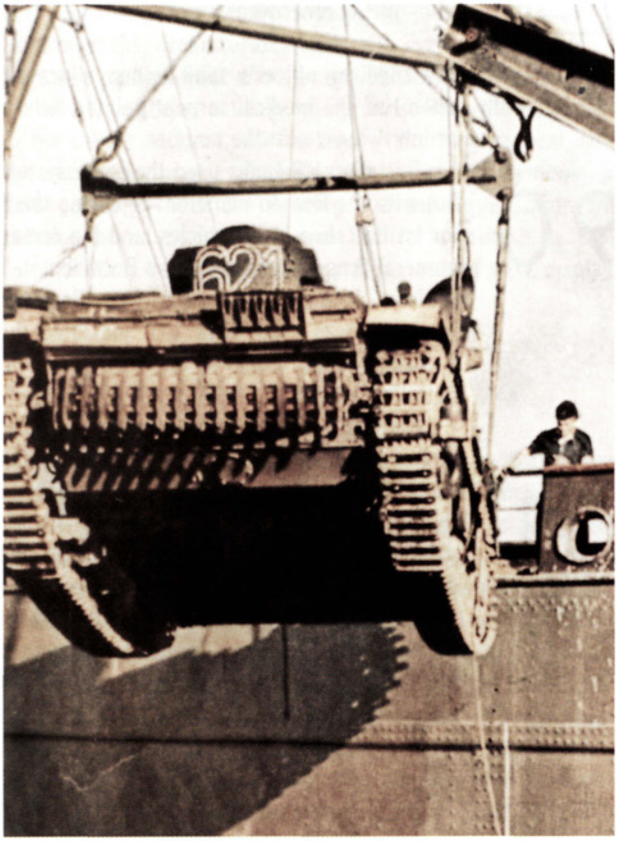
Opposite, above right: The faded nature of the *Feldmütze* (cap) and shirt in use is shown by this NCO at an observation post.

Opposite, below left: The Panzer grey colour is shown on this PzKpfw III of 5th Panzer Regiment as it is landed in Tripoli, late February 1941. The three-digit callsign is seen on the turret rear.

Opposite, below right: The crew of an MG34 in a sangar show how the fading varied on uniform items. The sun helmets (discarded after the first few months as too cumbersome) started off with reed-green coverings, here faded to two different shades.



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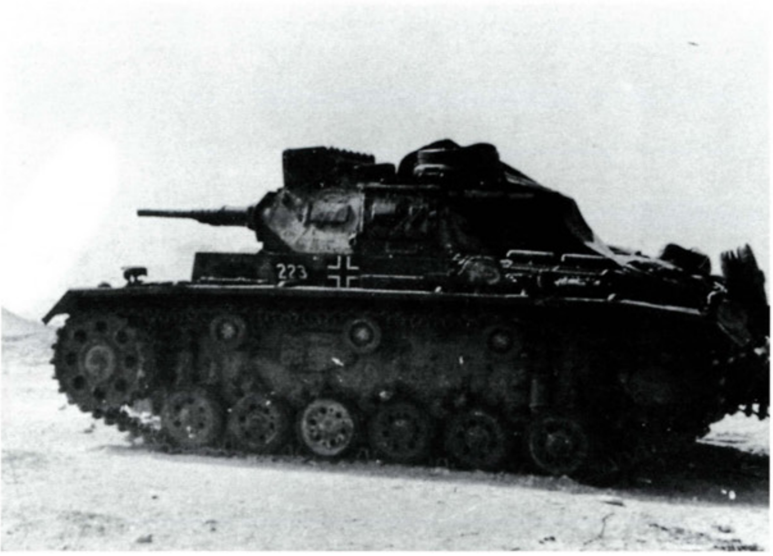
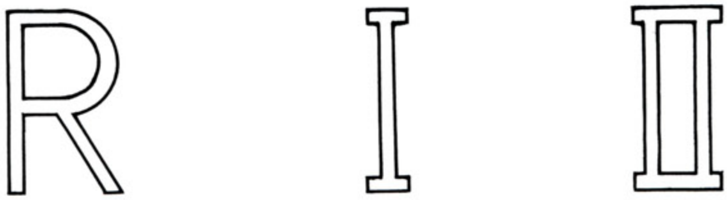
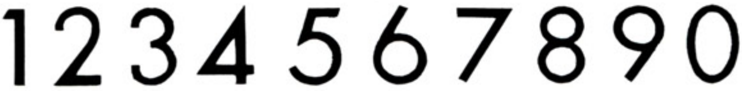
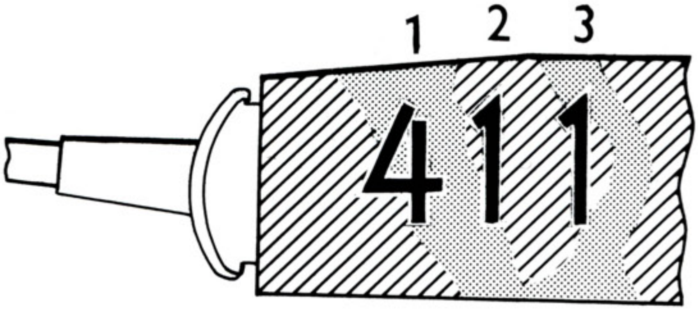








painted in small digits on a rhomboid metal plate (the rhomboid was the tactical symbol for a tank—see below) and this was affixed on superstructure or turret side and could be moved from vehicle to vehicle if desired. In the early part of the Cyrenaica campaign, some of the old tanks issued to 5th Panzer Regiment still carried this style of prewar marking.

However, most had the new style adopted when the war started. The same sort of three-digit numbering was used, but the numbers were now painted large on the turret or superstructure sides. These could be in plain white or yellow but were often red (or some other colour) outlined in white. Many tanks in 5th Panzer Regiment carried this style with the red number outlined in white.

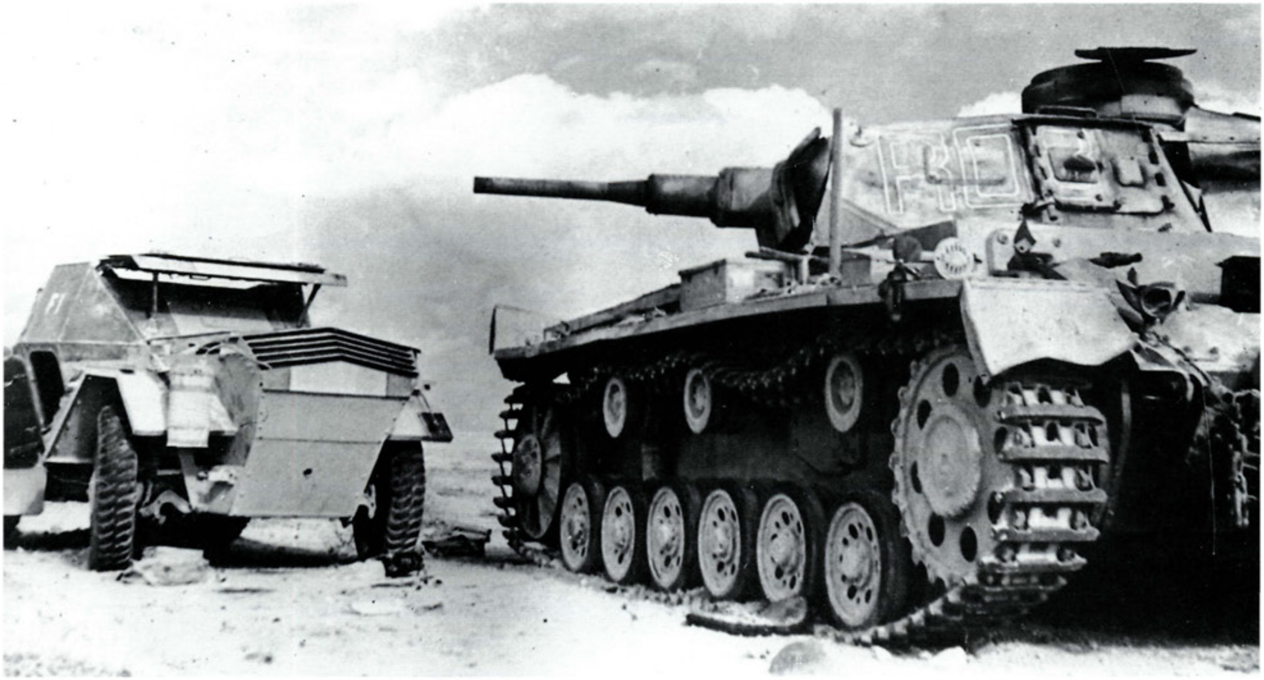
Headquarters vehicles had a variation of this battalion (*Abteilung*) numbering system. Regimental command tanks had a prefix R in front of a two-digit number in the style:

R01	Regt commander
R02	Regt adjutant
R03	Regt ordnance or signal officer
R04-R08	other Regt officers

The medical officer's tank (when allocated) often had the medical serpent painted behind or interwoven with the number.

Battalion HQ tanks used the same system but with the Roman numeral I replacing the R for Ist Battalion staff vehicles, and the roman numeral II as the prefix for IInd Battalion staff vehicles. If there was a IIIrd Battalion, the roman III was used. Thus 'I01' indicated the battalion commander's tank of the first battalion and so on.

Companies were numbered through the regiment so the first company of the IInd Battalion had 5 as the first digit (assuming four companies in the Ist Battalion). In this system the company commander took the digits 01, so the company commander of the 1st Company in the IInd Battalion had 501 on his tank. The company sergeant major took 02, hence 502, and any other company staff tank would take 503, 504, etc. First tank in the first platoon would be 511, and so on.



TACTICAL SYMBOLS

The German army had a complex but logical system of small symbols indicating every type of unit in what amounted to 'pictogram' form. These symbols could be used on maps, organisation charts and even on directional signs if need be. They were also painted front and rear on vehicles. There were symbols for tank units (the rhomboid), wheeled artillery, recce units, SP artillery, supply columns, and so on. In the desert, at least, this method of marking tactical symbols was not applied thoroughly, and many vehicles carried no tactical symbols, indicating perhaps the fluid nature of both the fighting and the organisation which often led to the creation of ad hoc units. Some tactical symbols, such as those of divisional commanders, were painted on metal plates and were displayed on vehicles and in locations when appropriate.

NATIONAL INSIGNIA

When the war started a plain white (sometimes yellow) Balkan cross was applied to vehicles used in the Polish campaign. For the French campaign of 1940 this was modified to a white outline on the dark grey base colour. Vehicles sent to Libya early in 1940 carried these earlier markings. For example, Rommel's map caravan (see photograph on page 22) still had the plain white cross of the Polish campaign. Against the dark sand colour the white cross did not show up sufficiently so the centre was painted in black in similar style to the cross on Luftwaffe aircraft. However, DAK made extensive use of captured British vehicles and to distinguish these for their own troops they applied oversize versions on sides and sometimes tops. In a few cases a big white or black swastika sign was applied instead. For normal air recognition the DAK used the national flag tied over engine covers or turret tops as a very good temporary sign when needed in the presence of Luftwaffe aircraft.

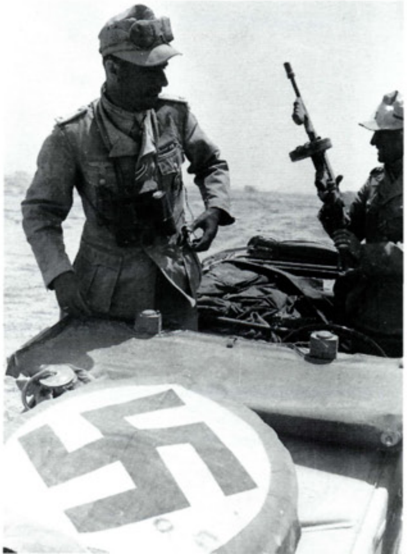
Opposite page, top: This 5th Panzer Regiment PzKpfw III's tactical number is painted in the prewar style on a metal plate next to the national marking. Note the vehicle is still in Panzer grey

Opposite page, centre: Lettering style for regimental and battalion staff identification; numeral styles.

Opposite page, below: Digit identification system.

Above: A knocked out PzKpfw III (with a British Dingo scout car alongside) carries the R02 callsign of a regimental adjutant.

Below: Another example of the use of the national flag for air recognition purposes, this time over the front and spare wheel of a VW Kübelwagen. One of the soldiers carries a Thompson sub-machine gun captured from the British.



Right: Panzer III Ausf G of 5th Panzer Regiment in 1941. It is painted overall in Desert Yellow over Panzer Grey. Note national marking (cross) and turret callsign.

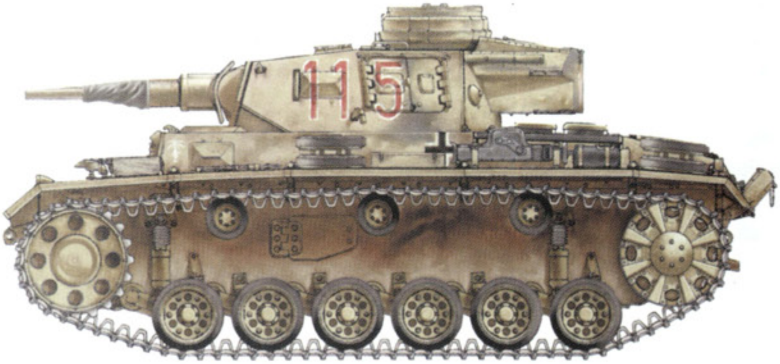
Below right: Panzer III Ausf J of 21st Panzer Division as it would have appeared during the fighting around Bir Hakeim in May 1942.

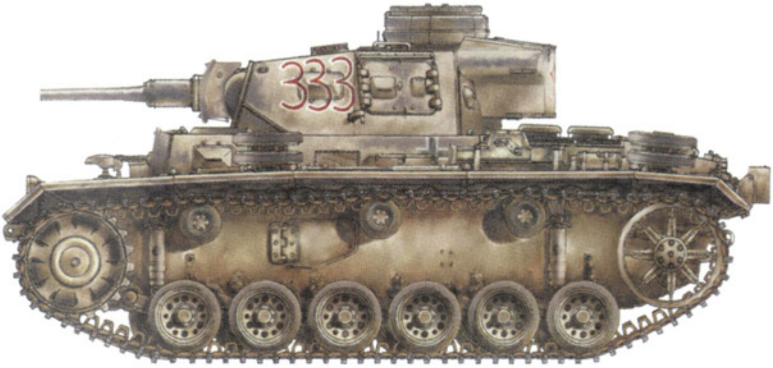
Bottom right: Rear turret view of grey PzKpfw III Ausf F at Saumur Tank Museum, showing the rear turret callsign applied to German tanks. **Artwork and photo on this page courtesy Accion Press**

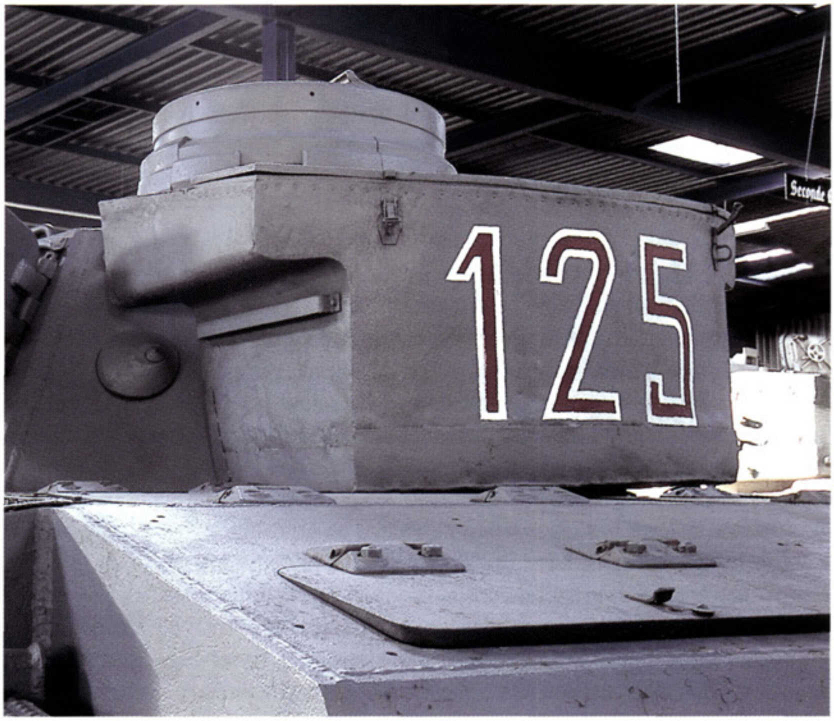
Opposite page, top: MG34 crew in a defence position sangar, showing again the great variety in shade and style of uniform worn by DAK men.

Opposite page, below left: On the beach at Sollum, a Panzer II shows off its turret markings.

Opposite page, below right: A Panzergrenadier *Unteroffizier* (NCO) and *Schütze* (private) in a slit trench at the time of Alamein. The bleached sandbag helmet covers worn in British fashion were not common.







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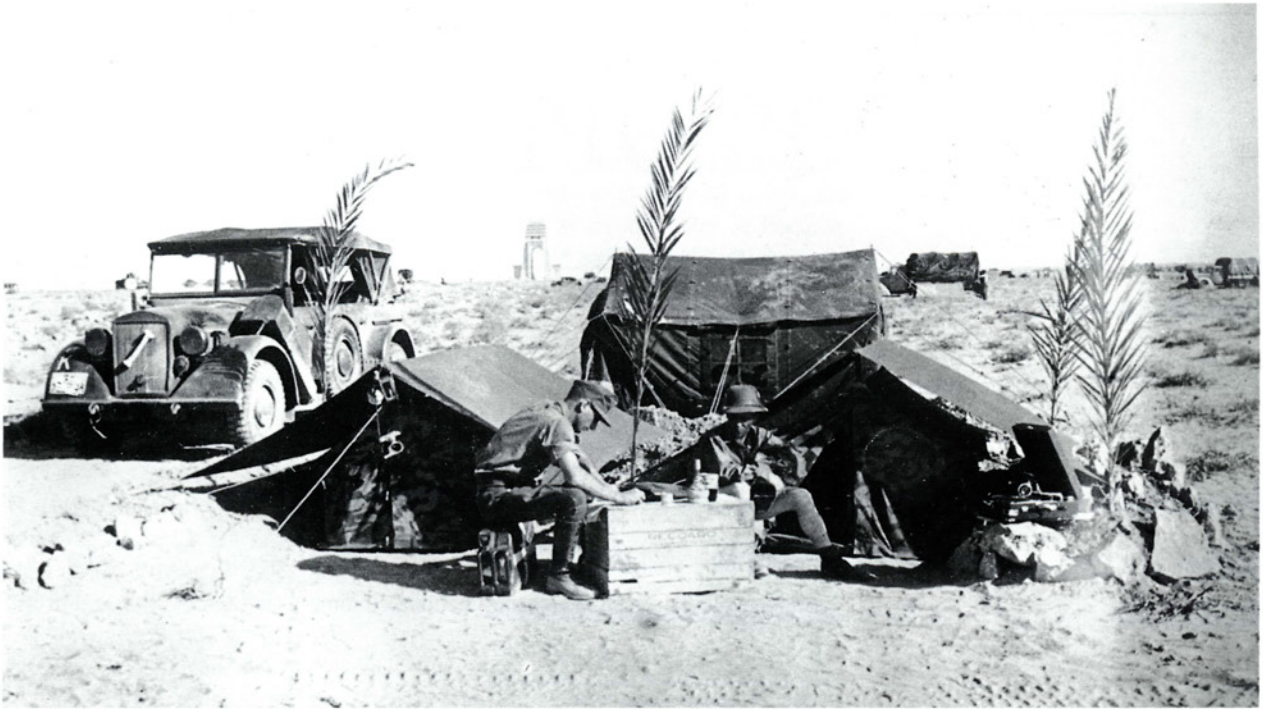

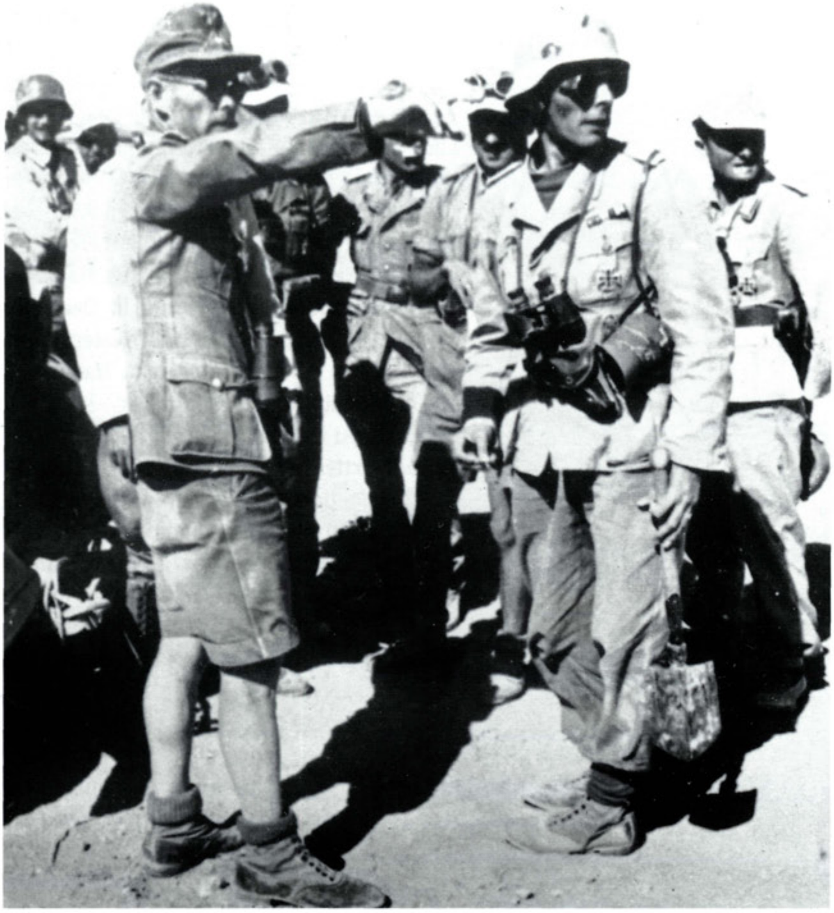

Opposite page, above: Divisional command post of 21st Panzer with Sd Kfz 251/6 command halftrack displaying the appropriate metal command pennant, pictured during the January–February 1942 offensive. The general (in sun helmet) is partly hidden by staff officers as he leans against the vehicle.

Opposite page, below: Afrika Korps men captured in Tunis are marched away by British troops. There is still a remarkable consistency in uniforms.

Above: A regimental command post set up near the coast road and near 'Marble Arch' at El Agheila just before the first Cyrenaica offensive.

Left: Staff officers of General Crüwell, then Afrika Korps commander, at a conference in summer 1942 near Alamein. Again there is great variety in uniform, including trousers, breeches, and shorts.

PEOPLE

ROMMEL

Erwin Rommel was born in Heidenheim, Württemberg, on 17 November 1891. He joined the army in March 1910, and that July entered the 124th Württemberg Infantry Regiment. Promotion came quickly and in 1911 he went to officer cadet school—the Kriegschule Danzig. Leutnant Rommel came back to his regiment in 1912.

At the start of World War I he was a platoon commander and saw his first action in August–September 1914 at Bleid, in the Meuse Valley. He was wounded during hand-to-hand fighting, and was subsequently awarded the Iron Cross, Second Class. Hospitalised, he went back to the front at Argonne, where on 29 January 1915 he was awarded the Iron Cross, First Class, for his part in a daring raid and in June he was wounded again. He was promoted Oberleutnant and company commander in September of the same year.

In November 1916 he married Lucie Maria Mollin in Danzig and transferred that same month to the Württemberg Mountain Battalion. He finished his spell on the Western Front at Hilsen Ridge and then transferred to the Eastern Front—to Romania where he fought at Gagesti and Mount Cosna—and then the Italian Front where he fought on Monte Majur. He won the Pour le Mérite in December 1917, returning to the Western Front where he ended the war a *Hauptmann* (captain) and a staff officer.

At the end of the war he returned to Württemberg. He survived the drastic reduction of German armed forces, ending up commanding an internal security company, No 32 IS Company at Friedrichshafen, where he quickly motivated a hostile unit. Appointed to command a company of Reichsheer Infanterie Regiment 13 based on Stuttgart in January 1921, he would spend the next eight years with the regiment before becoming an Instructor, at the Dresden Infantry School. During this time his only child, Manfred, was born.

Below: Rommel directs a tank battle on the horizon from his personal Sd Kfz 250/3 radio-fitted half-track 'Greif'. Visible(standing) is a Luftwaffe liaison officer to direct the air support.

In April 1932 he was promoted *Major*, and two years later, during 1934, he met Hitler for the first time, when his company formed an honour guard at a rally. This proximity to the Führer would see Rommel fall under the spell of the Nazi leader, and Rommel would be attached to Hitler's military escort for a party rally at Nuremberg in 1936 and command the *Führerbegleitbataillon* (escort battalion) at Hitler's field HQ during the occupation of the Sudetenland in 1938. During the 1930s, Rommel also did a three-year tour of duty as an instructor at Potsdam Infantry School, and in 1937 his book *Infanterie greift an!* (*Infantry attacks!*) was published.

He was promoted *Oberst* (colonel) in 1938 and became commandant of the Wiener Neustadt Kriegschule from November 1938 to August 1939. Twice during this period he was called on to command Hitler's field HQ. When the invasion of

Above left: Rommel discusses troop dispositions; at left, Streich with Schmidt, Rommel's ADC, at far right.

Left: The Desert Fox makes a point, cup in hand.

Poland began, he was once more given this duty with promotion to *Generalmajor*. Following Hitler's successful campaign, he decided he wanted an operational command and, thanks to Hitler's intervention, was able to plump for a tank unit rather than a mountain division.

On 6 February 1940 Rommel took charge of 7th Panzer Division—the 'Ghost' Division—on the Western Front. He handled the unit brilliantly, covering himself with personal glory: on 15 May 1940 he was awarded the Clasp to the Iron Cross and on 26 May the Knight's Cross to the Iron Cross. He exploited the tenets of Blitzkrieg and the mobility of his armoured units to the cost of the French and British forces ranged against him. 7th Panzer captured nearly 100,000 prisoners with losses of only 682 killed. Little did he know, when the armistice was signed with France, what awaited him on the shores of the Mediterranean.

In January 1941 Rommel was promoted *Generalleutnant* and in February he became Commander-in-Chief of German Troops in Libya, personally selected for the job by Hitler. His desert war has become legendary. Always short of men and equipment, frequently without sufficient air support, he would take the DAK almost to the Pyramids before being thrown back. On 21 January 1942 he was awarded Swords to the Oakleaves of the Knight's Cross. After the capture of Tobruk in 1942 he was promoted *Generalfeldmarschall*. It was the apogee of his success. While recovering from sickness in Germany in autumn 1942, the Battle of Alamein began and he was recalled to Africa where he presided over the long retreat back through Libya. In March 1943 Hitler presented him the Diamonds to his Iron Cross, only the sixth winner of this coveted award. He left Africa in summer 1943, becoming Commander-in-Chief Army Group B, Italy. In November 1943, Rommel left Italy, taking on special responsibilities for inspecting the defences on Northwest Europe. This he did and, subsequently, on 15 January 1944 Rommel's Army Group B took over control of the Atlantic and Channel coasts. Rommel did not have much time to improve the defences of the Atlantic Wall. On 6 June 1944 the invasion of Normandy took place and on 17 July, in the middle of the Battle of Normandy, Rommel was severely wounded when his car was strafed on his way to his HQ at La Roche Guyon. He was first hospitalised and then took sick leave. During this he was implicated in the bomb plot against Hitler and forced to commit suicide. He received a state funeral on 18 October 1944.

Commanders of 21st Panzer Division

Name	CO From	To	Comments
Generalmajor Johannes Streich	20/2/41	22/7/41	Dismissed by Rommel
Generalmajor Johann von Ravenstein	23/7/41	29/11/41	Captured by Commonwealth forces
Oberstleutnant Gustav-Georg Knabe	29/11/41	30/11/41	Retired due to ill health
Generalleutnant Karl Böttcher	30/11/41	30/1/42	Retired due to ill health
Generalmajor Georg von Bismarck	30/1/42	31/8/42	Killed in action
Oberst Carl-Hans Lungerhausen	31/8/42	18/9/42	Temporary commander
Generalmajor Heinz von Randow	18/9/42	21/12/42	Killed in action
Oberst Hans-Georg Hilderbrandt	1/1/43	25/4/43	Retired due to ill health
Generalmajor Heinrich-Hermann von Hülsen	25/4/43	13/5/43	Surrendered with DAK in Tunisia
Generalleutnant Edgar Feuchtinger	15/7/43	25/1/45	Commanded reformed division in Normandy
Generalmajor Oswin Grolig	15/1/44	8/3/44	Temporary replacement
Generalmajor Franz Westhoven	8/3/44	8/5/44	Temporary replacement
Oberst Helmut Zollenkopf	25/1/45	29/4/45	Surrendered to Russians

Rommel was a brilliant tactician, a courageous soldier and an inspiring leader of men. Respected by his foes as much as his friends, his desert campaigns showed him to be a consummate general with the knack of being in the right place at the right time, and the skill to make the right decisions when under extreme pressure.

GENERALMAJOR JOHANNES STREICH

Born 16 April 1891 at Augustenburg, East Prussia, Streich joined up in 1911 and fought throughout WW1, reaching the rank of *Leutnant*, commanding a company and winning the Iron Cross First and Second Class. Postwar he served in an MT company, then played an important part in the development of the PzKpfw I–IV, as a technical adviser in the Army Ordnance Office. In 1937 he took command of Panzer Regiment 15, promoted to *Oberst* in April 1938. He fell out with Rommel on two occasions, first in France in 1940 in the rush to the coast and later in Africa during the siege of Tobruk, where he was relieved of his command. Rommel criticised him, saying that he was far too concerned with the well-being of his troops, to which Streich replied: 'I can think of no greater words of praise for a divisional commander.' He was awarded the Knight's Cross for his bravery in France —his regiment had smashed through a blocking position at La Bassé, taking 20,000 prisoners and reaching the Atlantic coast. He was promoted to *Generalmajor* and given command of 5th Light Division before being sent to North Africa.

GENERALMAJOR JOHANN VON RAVENSTEIN

Lean, aristocratic and good looking, Johann von Ravenstein was born in 1889, in Strehlen, Silesia. He joined the army in 1909 and was commissioned as a *Leutnant* into the 7th Grenadier Regiment. He served in WW1 and was wounded several times in four years on the Western Front. He was awarded Germany's highest decoration, the Pour le Mérite, on 25 June 1918 for conspicuous bravery during the Battle of the Marne. He left the army at the end of the war, but rejoined in

Left: Von Ravenstein after his capture by the New Zealanders is seen with his escort officer.

1934 as CO 2nd Battalion 60th Infantry Regiment, which later became 4th Cavalry Rifle Regiment and which he led into action in 1940. He was then promoted to *Generalmajor* and on 20 May 1941 assigned command of 21st Panzer Regiment, taking it to North Africa. He took over command of 21st Panzer Division when Rommel dismissed Streich, holding the position for six months. He was captured by New Zealanders on 29 November 1941, while on his way to DAK HQ during the Crusader battles, when he mistakenly drove into their positions.

OBERSTLEUTNANT GUSTAV-GEORG KNABE

Born 8 July 1897 at Wichmannsdorf, near Templin, Gustav-Georg Knabe left school at 17 in order to volunteer for war service, joining the 8th Brandenburg Infantry Regiment. He saw action on the Western Front and was promoted up through the ranks to end the war as *Leutnant*. After WW1 he remained in the *Reichswehr*, spending a time at Kriegschule before serving with 1st Panzer Division. Promoted *Major*, after a spell of sickness he joined 66th Infantry Regiment. He saw action on the Western Front in 1940 as CO 2nd Battalion, 93rd Motorised Infantry Regiment, before being sent to Africa with the 15th Motorcycle Battalion. By now an *Oberstleutnant*, he was in the advanced elements of this unit when he took both Sollum and Capuzzo, for which he was awarded the Knight's Cross. He then commanded 104th Panzergrenadier Regiment until given charge of 21st Panzer Division in November 1941. His tenure was only nominal, for immediately ill health forced his return to Germany. Following his recovery, he was promoted to *Oberst* and served with Panzergruppe West. After a severe car accident while serving as a training and staff officer with Romanian forces he was invalided out of the army.

GENERALLEUTNANT KARL BÖTTCHER

Rommel's artillery commander, Böttcher was born in Thorn, East Prussia in 1891. He joined the army as an officer candidate in March 1909, becoming a *Leutnant* in the 5th Foot Artillery Regiment. He served in WW1, the interwar *Reichswehr* and began WW2 as commander of the 1st Artillery Regiment. Promoted to *Generalmajor* in March 1940, in November 1941 he was appointed CO of 21st Panzer Division when Knabe went home ill. He was awarded the Knight's Cross in December 1941 for preventing far superior enemy forces from breaking through to relieve Tobruk. After two months in charge of the division he, too, fell ill and was evacuated to Germany, where he was promoted to *Generalleutnant* on 1 March 1942. He subsequently served on the OKH reserve and commanded various infantry and artillery divisions.

GENERALMAJOR GEORG VON BISMARCK

Born in Neumühl, near Küstrin in 1891, Georg von Bismarck joined the army in 1911 as a young officer in the 6th Light Infantry Battalion. He served throughout WW1, winning the Royal House Order of Hohenzollern with Swords for bravery. In 1939–40 he commanded 7th Rifle Regiment in Poland and France, where he was awarded the Knight's Cross for his part in 7th Panzer Division's meteoric push to the Atlantic coast. On 5 January 1942 he was posted to Africa, where Rommel gave

Above: Rommel with von Bismarck.

him command of 21st Panzer Division. He then led it in a sustained advance from Cyrenaica to El Alamein. On 1 August 1942 he was promoted to *Generalleutnant.* He was killed in a mortar attack while crossing the minefields at Alam Halfa at the end of that same month.

OBERST CARL-HANS LUNGERHAUSEN

Born on 20 July 1896 at Darmstadt, Lungerhausen joined the army in August 1914, as a *Leutnant* in the Dragoons. Postwar he commanded 1st Battalion 8th Cavalry Regiment in the *Reichswehr.* He was promoted to *Oberst* in February 1939 and later commanded the 164th Leichte Division in Africa from August till late November 1942. From 31 August to 18 September of the same year he temporarily filled in as commander of 21st Panzer Division following Bismarck's death. He was promoted *Generalleutnant* on 1 January 1943, and served later in Sardinia and Italy, being awarded the German Cross in Gold.

GENERALMAJOR HEINZ VON RANDOW

Born on 15 November 1890 at Grammau, von Randow joined the army on 18 June 1910 as a *Leutnant* in the 18th Dragoon Regiment. He was a cavalryman who witnessed the transfer of the unit to tanks. Postwar he served in the *Reichswehr*, commanding Cavalry Regiment 13. He was promoted *Oberst* on 1 February, 1939. He commanded 21st Panzer Division from 18 September 1942 until 21 December 1942, when he was killed near Tripoli during the DAK withdrawal, a few days after being promoted *Generalleutnant.* He was the holder of the German Cross in Gold.

OBERST HANS-GEORG HILDERBRANDT

Born on 15 June 1896 at Fraustadt, Hilderbrandt joined the army in August 1914 as *Leutnant* in the 36th Fusilier Regiment. Following the end of WW1 he remained in the *Reichswehr.* He was promoted *Oberst* in November 1940, finally reaching

Right: Generaloberst von Arnim (left), the last commander of German forces in Tunisia, is briefed by the last commander of 21st Panzer Division in North Africa, Generalmajor Heinrich-Hermann von Hülsen a month before the Axis surrender in May 1943.

the rank of *Generalleutnant* on 1 June 1944. He commanded 21st Panzer Division from 1 January 1943 to 15 March 1943, when he fell ill. After almost a year of sick leave, he then commanded 715th Infantry Division. He was the holder of the German Cross in Gold.

GENERALMAJOR HEINRICH-HERMANN VON HÜLSEN

Born on 8 July 1895 in Weimar, Hülsen joined the army on 28 April 1914 as a *Leutnant* in the Fusiliers. Following the end of WW1 he, too, remained in the *Reichswehr*, commanding Cavalry Regiment 11. He was promoted *Oberst* in December 1940, and *Generalmajor* in May 1943. Having commanded Schützenbrigade 9, he was then a staff officer with Panzerarmee Afrika before commanding 21st Panzer Division. He surrendered with the division to the Allies and was taken prisoner on 12 May 1943.

GENERALMAJOR EDGAR FEUCHTINGER

Edgar Feuchtinger was born in Metz on 9 November 1894 and joined the army on 7 August 1914. He was originally an artilleryman, serving in both WW1 and afterwards in the *Reichswehr*, being promoted to *Oberstleutnant* in 1938. He was a strong Nazi sympathiser who had helped organise the annual rallies at Nuremberg. He became an *Oberst* in 1941 and *Generalmajor* in 1943, commanding 21st Panzer Division when it was reformed in Normandy, with two short breaks during which it was commanded first by Generalmajor Oswin Grolig and then by Generalmajor Franz Westhoven. Feuchtinger was awarded the German Cross in Gold, and in August 1944 he was promoted *Generalleutnant*.

OBERST HELMUT ZOLLENKOPF

Taking command of the unit in spring 1945, Zollenkopf's 21st Panzer Division consisted of a single combined battalion based on 22nd Panzer Regiment. Directed to the defence of East Germany, Zollenkopf surrendered the division to the Soviet Army on 29 April 1945.

ASSESSMENT

The story of 21st Panzer Division, particularly in the 1941 period when it formed the bulk of Rommel's very much understrength DAK, is unusual in that it was free from the taint of Nazi political intervention in the sense that there was no involvement of the SS or political leaders. This is not to say that Rommel was antipathetic to Hitler—far from it—or that his command was free of attempted military interference. Rommel's strength was that he almost always ignored interference, took gambles and won. The desert war in particular is free of rumours of atrocities or cruelty outside the the usual horrors of warfare. Both sides treated prisoners as well as they could in the circumstances, cared for each other's wounded, and generally engaged in a chivalry of warfare that has been almost absent from the battlefield ever since.

It is well known that each side respected the other, and there are many records of surrendered troops on either side congratulating their opponents for a victory well and fairly won, and for the victors treating their captured foes with respect in the aftermath of battle. Not for nothing was Rommel respected by the British soldier who admired his skilful handling of his troops and the achievements of those troops with, usually, numerically inferior forces. In fact Rommel was held in such regard by the British troops that British military leaders in 1942 had to make a conscious effort to belittle him as a dangerous enemy.

Because the desert was a 'neutral' battleground, almost free from towns and with few inhabitants, the warfare was very 'pure', almost like a large game of chess on which the pieces of war could be freely manoeuvred. This attitude percolated through both sides, and in no other theatre of war did both sides hum the same sentimental tune—'Lili Marlene', a German song popular in DAK which was also taken up by the British and Commonwealth forces, so that it became a common theme for all who fought under desert skies.

As a fighting force 21st Panzer reflected throughout the skill and dedication of its commanders, and a professionalism typical of all German military formations of the first rank. Much initiative was shown at all levels in keeping with German military training, and there was all-arms co-ordination that often made up for inferior numbers. Even in the hopeless situation of Normandy, where for the first day or two 21st Panzer was the only substantial German formation in the field, it gave a good account of itself. But lacking back-up in the opening hours, it was limited in what it could achieve despite brave fighting by men of the division.

Excluding actions in NW Europe in 1944–45, when 21st Panzer Division was pitched into battle against impossible odds, it enjoyed an enviable reputation as a highly successful formation, invariably well commanded both at divisional and corps level. In the Western Desert it only came off worse when the numerical disadvantage was huge, but even then, because of a certain amount of muddle and indecision on

Below: Young Iron Cross recipient:

Above: The mainstays of the desert fighting—German infantry advancing with a PzKpfw III in close support.

the British side, the division escaped being severely bloodied even when it expected to be. For example, at First Alamein a flank attack on 21st Panzer, which could easily have cut off the divisions, was not pursued with vigour and the division was able to make a withdrawal when it might, instead, have been annihilated. Similarly, stranded without fuel in the early stages of the Gazala battles, it survived because the British forces, not appreciating the situation, held off.

Faulty staff work, timid tank handling and ill-thought out decisions on the British side were an undoubted aid to the DAK Panzer divisions and often compensated for their weakness in numbers. Allied with this was the bold, instinctive handling by the corps commander, Rommel, whose legendary exploits often had a psychological affect on British morale. German Panzer divisions, including the 21st, scored over the British very often because of the German military philosophy of all-arms co-operation and organisation which allowed even small organic groups to be self-contained as fighting units. All too often the British rigidity of operation meant that there was little or no true co-operation between infantry, artillery and armour. This was seen several times in the desert war when the British used defended 'boxes' largely occupied only by infantry formations with no close-by or integral armour support since the armour itself was located further back in the desert.

Even when the British used mobile formations they tended to be single arms, such as armour, with no accompanying infantry of any substance. The German mobile columns, by contrast, included infantry, artillery and armour all working together. The Germans used their limited resources to the full. This is well illustrated by the use of the Flak 88 gun, which had been tried on occasions (and unofficially) in the anti-tank role before 1941 but was used purposefully as an anti-tank gun once Rommel realised its range advantage and immense destructive power against British tanks. Even after it was proven from emplaced ground positions, notably at Halfaya Pass, the Germans did not leave it at that. Expediency during the early running tank battles showed that it could fire successfully from its wheeled carriage without being emplaced, and the tactical advantage of that, first discovered by 21st Panzer Division, soon became a standard practice throughout the German Army. Throughout the rest of the war the Allies never really found an effective answer to the 88, whether it was used as a wheeled anti-tank gun or, later, fitted in late-war tanks. By contrast, inflexible British thinking never allowed the German practice to be copied, even though the 3.7-inch AA gun, available in large numbers, was slightly better than the 88. To the British it was designed as an AA gun and that was how it stayed.

In qualitative terms German tanks were usually more reliable and better built than the British equivalents, but against this only rarely did the Panzer divisions field more tanks in a battle than the British. In the early days the difference in gun performance and armour penetration was not as great as the British often made out. The 50mm gun of the early models of the PzKpfw III was almost exactly equivalent to the British 2pdr in performance and armour penetration (about 39mm–40mm), and the PzKpfw IV—in use for most of the desert campaign—only had a low velocity 75mm short calibre gun which was only really good for firing HE in a support role. Yet British tank crews reported being penetrated by PzKpfw IVs at 3,000 yards' range, obviously assuming tank guns were firing at them when it was an 88 doing the damage. The PzKpfw IV did not really become effective in the tank-killing role until it was fitted with the long calibre high velocity 75mm gun (the so-called PzKpfw IV 'Special') and these were not available to Rommel until summer 1942.

The Germans quickly realised that superior anti-tank guns were the key to winning in a tank battle. The 88 was soon joined by the 50mm Pak 38 in the desert and these two towed guns, highly mobile, did most of the real damage to the British as they could outrange the British tank guns.

Where the British had superior armour thickness, as on the Matilda tank, they were able to field an effective weapon, but the British forces were weakened by the prewar policy of having two classes of combat tank—infantry and cruiser—both with different top speeds, in the case of infantry tanks a very slow one. The shrewd combination of tanks and anti-tank guns in tactical situations was the real key to the success of the Panzer divisions in the desert fighting, and because of the open nature of the battlefield the advantage could be exploited to the full. Given the tactical ingenuity so often demonstrated by the corps commander, Rommel, and the fortitude and professionalism of the commanders, officers and men of the DAK Panzer divisions, they emerged from the campaign with a high reputation and a much-respected record which has not been tarnished by time.

Below: The aftermath of battle—a Panzer burns.

REFERENCE

GD for CM
...zermuseum
Munster

Ehemalige NVA
2-nd PzDiv 1939-1...
2-nd PzDiv 1940-1943
2-nd PzDiv 1943-1945
3-rd PzDiv Basic sign
3-rd PzDiv 1940-1945
3-rd PzDiv Variant of sign
20-th PzDiv
20-th PzDiv 1942-1945
21-st PzDiv
22-nd PzDiv
23-rd PzDiv
Elite Units of the German Armed Forces
1933 - 1945

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http://www.tankclub.agava.ru/sign/sign.shtml
Russian-language site with excellent illustrations of the tactical signs of the German army

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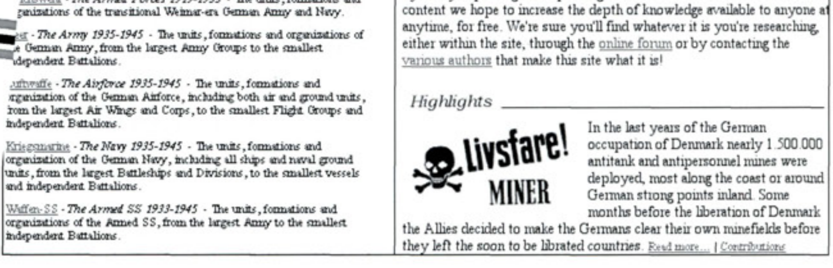
http://members.nbci.com/dicemanrick/gerpg/shpics/index.htm
The site above is part of the excellent Spearhead: France 1944 site: This features items for WWII miniature wargaming using the Spearhead rules by Arty Conliffe and other items concerning WWII history.



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ichswehr - *The Armed Forces 1919-1935* - The units, formations and ganizations of the transitional Weimar-era German Army and Navy.

er - *The Army 1935-1945* - The units, formations and organizations of e German Army, from the largest Army Groups to the smallest dependent Battalions.

uftwaffe - *The Airforce 1935-1945* - The units, formations and rganization of the German Airforce, including both air and ground units, rom the largest Air Wings and Corps, to the smallest Flight Groups and independent Battalions.

Kriegsmarine - *The Navy 1935-1945* - The units, formations and organization of the German Navy, including all ships and naval ground units, from the largest Battleships and Divisions, to the smallest vessels and independent Battalions.

Waffen-SS - *The Armed SS 1933-1945* - The units, formations and organizations of the Armed SS, from the largest Army to the smallest independent Battalions.

Welcome to the premier website on the German Armed Forces from 1919 to 1945. We focus on the history of the German military during the most tumultuous period in recent history. Our main focus is on the history of the units and organizations that made up the German military during WWII, although the post-WWI and pre-WWII German military are also covered.

Although this site is a work in progress our motto is "information kept secret is lost" - by always updating and expanding our content we hope to increase the depth of knowledge available to anyone at anytime, for free. We're sure you'll find whatever it is you're researching, either within the site, through the online forum or by contacting the various authors that make this site what it is!

Highlights

In the last years of the German occupation of Denmark nearly 1.500.000 antitank and antipersonnel mines were deployed, most along the coast or around German strong points inland. Some months before the liberation of Denmark the Allies decided to make the Germans clear their own minefields before they left the soon to be librated countries. Read more... | Contributions

http://www.geocities.com/MotorCity/8418/21pz.htm
Giving orbats and a brief history, this site is from Tracks and Armour's Armoured Formation Profiles, which include many more Axis and Allied units, including most of the Panzer divisions. It includes information on the armed troops of all WW2 armies and has a glossary on Panzer divisions.

http://pzfaust.tripod.com/home.htm
A re-enactors' website for German units and dealers in re-enactor equipments. The 21st Panzer Division re-enactment unit is based in Southern California and is an active member of the California Historical Group. Unit members come from all over the West to participate in public events and battle re-enactments.

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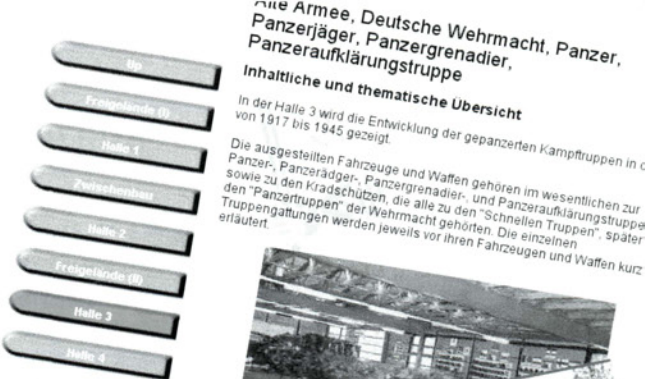
http://www.panzermuseum.com/
Panzermuseum Munster has 40 Wehrmacht vehicles from the 1934–45 era including: Panzer I, II, III, IV, V Panther, VI Königstiger, Sturmgeschütze, Jagdpanzer, Schützenpanzer, Spähpanzer.

http://www.feldgrau.com/
Comprehensive listing and info on German armed forces from 1919 to 1945.



Alte Armee, Deutsche Wehrmacht, Panzer, Panzerjäger, Panzergrenadier, Panzeraufklärungstruppe

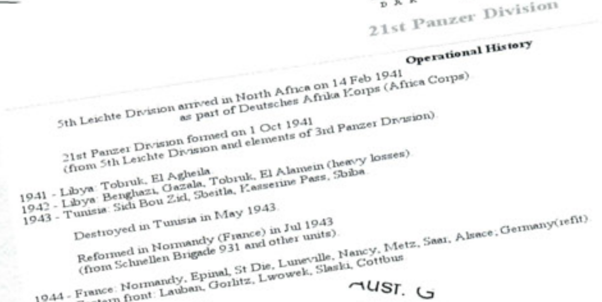
Inhaltliche und thematische Übersicht

In der Halle 3 wird die Entwicklung der gepanzerten Kampftruppen in d
von 1917 bis 1945 gezeigt.

Die ausgestellten Fahrzeuge und Waffen gehören im wesentlichen zur
Panzer-, Panzerädger-, Panzergrenadier-, und Panzeraufklärungstruppe
sowie zu den Kradschützen, die alle zu den "Schnellen Truppen", später
den "Panzertruppen" der Wehrmacht gehörten. Die einzelnen
Truppengattungen werden jeweils vor ihren Fahrzeugen und Waffen kurz
erläutert.

Achtung Panzer
people of the Panzertrupp

The Generals o
World War
II



21st Panzer Division

Operational History

5th Leichte Division arrived in North Africa on 14 Feb 1941
as part of Deutsches Afrika Korps (Africa Corps).

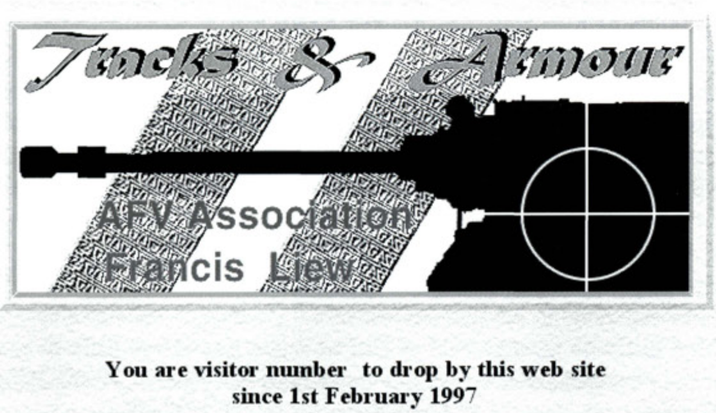
21st Panzer Division formed on 1 Oct 1941
(from 5th Leichte Division and elements of 3rd Panzer Division).

1941 - Libya: Tobruk, El Agheila
1942 - Libya: Benghazi, Gazala, Tobruk, El Alamein (heavy losses).
1943 - Tunisia: Sidi Bou Zid, Sbeitla, Kasserine Pass, Sbiba.

Destroyed in Tunisia in May 1943.

Reformed in Normandy (France) in Jul 1943
(from Schnellen Brigade 931 and other units).

1944 - France: Normandy, Epinal, St Die, Luneville, Nancy, Metz, Saar, Alsace, Germany(refit).
1945 - Eastern front: Lauban, Gorlitz, Lwowek, Slaski, Cottbus.



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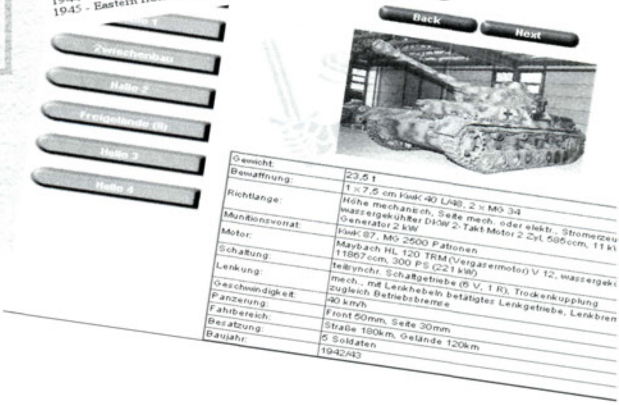

Gewicht:	23,5 t
Bewaffnung:	1 × 7,5 cm KwK 40 L/48, 2 × MG 34
Richtlange:	Höhe mechanisch, Seite mech. oder elektr., Stromerzeu wassergekühlter DKW 2-Takt-Motor 2 Zyl, 585ccm, 11 k Generator 2 kW
Munitionsvorrat:	KwK 87, MG 2500 Patronen
Motor:	Maybach HL 120 TRM (Vergasermotor) V 12, wassergek 11867ccm, 300 PS (221 kW)
Schaltung:	teilsynchr. Schaltgetriebe (6 V, 1 R), Trockenkupplung
Lenkung:	mech., mit Lenkhebeln betätigtes Lenkgetriebe, Lenkbren zugleich Betriebsbremse
Geschwindigkeit:	40 km/h
Panzerung:	Front 50mm, Seite 30mm
Fahrbereich:	Straße 180km, Gelände 120km
Besatzung:	5 Soldaten
Baujahr:	1942/43

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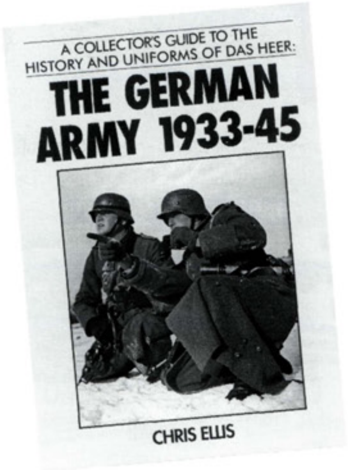
Top and Above: The re-enactors of US-based 21st Panzer Division.


A COLLECTOR'S GUIDE TO THE HISTORY AND UNIFORMS OF DAS HEER:
THE GERMAN ARMY 1933-45
CHRIS ELLIS

Above: Chris Ellis' guide to the history and uniforms of the German Army has been reprinted.

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This famous book gives succinct accounts and analysis of the sequence of desert battles, and assesses the performance (and often the failings) of the various British commanders over the whole period. It is very interesting reading, though there is very little coverage of 21st Panzer Division individually.

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Hitler's Forces
Afrika Korps at War
The Road to Alexandria
George Forty
Hitler's Forces
Afrika Korps at War
2: The Long Road Back
George Forty

Above: George Forty's *The Afrika Korps at War* (Vols 1 and 2) provide a fascinating series of personal accounts and photos.

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